

PROFESSOR

BERNICE SUMMERFIELD

SOMETHING CHANGED



A SHORT-STORY ANTHOLOGY
EDITED BY SIMON GUERRIER

BIG
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PROFESSOR

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SUMMERFIELD

SOMETHING CHANGED

A Short-Story Anthology

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SIMON GUERRIER

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**Sixteen brand new
short stories...**



SOMETHING CHANGED

A short-story anthology edited by
SIMON GUERRIER

Everybody dies.

There's a fresh grave on planetoid KS-159, but only Bernice Summerfield seems to have noticed. Her friends on the Braxiatel Collection are too busy with their own affairs to see how distraught she is, how keenly she feels this loss.

There's no time to grieve. Life must carry on, different and strange as it may be. Benny has a son and a bloke to look after, and a feud with Bev Tarrant to keep up. And shes also got dumped with a new assignment, babysitting some daft experiment.

Doggles claims his "history machine" will change everything. And the worst thing is that he's right.

**This brand-new anthology includes original stories by favourites
Ben Aaronovitch, Jonathan Clements, Joseph Lidster, Dave Stone
James Swallow and many more...**

Cover illustrations by Adrian Salmon

UK: £14.99 Science Fiction

www.bigfinish.com



Welcome to the Braxiatel Collection

Located on the planetoid KS-159, our collection of everything is no longer the austere, scary, by-invitation-only sort of place. Now we've opened our doors to students and academics from all across the cosmos.

Irving Braxiatel is our founder — suave and mysterious, and something of a sneaky devil. You're more likely to bump into **Bernice Summerfield**, our Professor of Archaeology land, unofficially, of Weird Adventures). She says she's working on her latest book, and we believe her. Benny's half-Killoran son **Peter** is now almost five — doesn't time fly? His all-Killoran dad, **Adrian Wall**, is construction manager at the Collection. He and Bernice aren't an item or anything, though. They never were. Look, it's complicated. Well-meaning rascal **Jason Kane** is Benny's current beau — they even used to be married. **Bev Tarrant** is PA. to Mr Braxiatel. Some people say she used to be an art thief, but we pay no heed to such gossip. Benny also has a personal assistant — **Joseph** who is one of our senior AIs, and linked to the Collection's main systems.

We hope you survive your stay.

Cover and flap illustrations by Adrian Salmon

UK: £ 14.99

ISBN 1-84435-153-X

Over 300,000 Bernice Summerfield adventures sold since 1992!

Any change has consequences...

Sixteen brand-new short stories about Bernice Summerfield (some-time adventurer, even-less-time Professor of Archaeology) and her extended 'family'. There's Jason Kane (ex-husband, ex-buccaneer, ex-author of xeno-porn) and Irving Braxiatel (employer, Renaissance Man, sneaky devil). There's Peter, Adrian, Bev and Hass. There's a planetoid full of weird creatures and aliens, and weirder academics and students. And, inevitably, there're the mysteries, murders, mayhem and major weirdness that happen whenever Benny gets out of bed...

The stories are:

Inappropriate Laughter by Simon Guerrier

Siege Mentality by James Swallow

Acts of Senseless Devotion by Pete Kempshall

Walking Backwards for Christmas by Ben Aaronovitch

Match of the Deity by Eddie Robson

Night of the Living Martian by John Isles

The God Gene by Ben Woodhams

Writing in Green by Dave Hoskin

Showing Initiative by David Cromarty

A Murderous Desire by Ian Farrington

Back and There Again by Dave Stone

One of My Turns by Sin Deniz

Two Dead Mice by Joseph Lidster

The Ice Garden by Jonathan Clements

Family Man by Ian Mond

After Life by Simon Guerrier

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Thanks to Justin Richards and Steve Tribe

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Acknowledgements

For Robert Dick. For everything.

The Braxiatel Collection

‘Collection of what?’ is an invalid question. Arguably the finest and most extensive in the known universe, it is a collection of everything. The various departments of the Braxiatel Collection house antique artefacts, literature, playscripts, recordings of events and people and performances, geological specimens, software and hardware from days gone by... A permanent home for the Braxiatel Collection is the planetoid formerly designated KS-159 — now itself known as the Braxiatel Collection. Once a very secure, by-invitation-only sort of place, since being liberated from Occupation by the Fifth Axis, the Collection has had a change of policy. Now it has opened its doors to students and academics.

The staff

Fabulously rich, **Irving Braxiatel** is Renaissance Man for the new era. He is well read, extremely learned, an expert in almost everything, though in some matters he lacks practical experience. He does have a tendency to miss the details while looking at the big picture — details like how people actually feel about things, for example. He has built up his collection over the years — probably over the centuries. But how old he really is, whether or not he actually ever ages, is not something that it is polite to discuss.

Professor Bernice Summerfield is a guest of Irving Braxiatel. She is currently working on a collection of papers to follow her best-selling coffee-table archaeology book *Down Among The Dead Men* (published originally in 2466, which is odd given it is now 2606). Her half-Killoran son, **Peter**, is five. He’s fast growing up into a right little tearaway. Probably gets that from his mother. **Wolsey** is Benny’s venerable tabby tomcat, whose mousing days are sadly long past. **Joseph** (so called for historical and sentimental reasons) is Benny’s personal digital assistant. He is an AI computer system linked to the Braxiatel Collection’s main scheduling systems, and he’s roughly the size of a football. Personality-wise (and again for historical/romantic reasons) Joseph has been programmed to be ‘dry’ and literal. Not surprisingly, he spends most of his time switched off.

Jason Kane is Benny’s ex-husband: wily, technically able, and not half the scoundrel most people think. In fact, when he’s not helping out in the management of the Collection (all a bit of a mess since Clarissa Jones, er, vacated), he’s got a flourishing career on the side as an author and academic. Of a sort, anyway.

Bev Tarrant is Brax’s PA — an odd role for a former art thief, whose role before the Occupation was ‘acquiring’ new items for Brax.

She has chestnut hair, and you can see the scars from when she was tortured by the Fifth Axis. She gave nothing away.

Adrian Wall is the construction manager. He is in charge of all the ongoing work on the Collection, and reports to Ms Jones. Like most of his workforce, Wall is a Killoran — a seven-foot-tall cross between an ape and an upright wolf complete with fangs, snout and claws. He is Peter's father — though (for reasons too complex to go into right now) he and Benny were never 'together'. **Hass** is the intergalactically renowned gardener on the Collection. A Martian, he can be seen lumbering around in his cold-suit, though he keeps himself to himself, doesn't say a lot, and doesn't seem at all happy to be here. It's best just to keep out of his way.

We hope your time on the Collection is useful. Enjoy your stay.

Chapter One

Inappropriate Laughter

By Simon Guerrier

Two shadows fell across the grave. There was no stone yet as the ground had to settle first. Hass said it would take six to eight months. It seemed such a long time. Adrian had already agreed to prepare the stone, and Bernice had been shocked when he'd quoted her a week. Hass said he had spoken to him since, and arranged something. She felt stupid, annoyed they'd agreed it without her.

She stared down at the loose soil. Hass had encouraged her to help fill in the hole, a shovel at a time. Sweaty, tired, raw, it helped her not to think. She couldn't even manage tears. The grave looked peaceful now. This spot, just next to the greenhouse, always got the sun. It had been a favourite place. He had loved napping here, lying right in the way of the gardeners. Hass used to trip over him. She smiled at that, and tears came.

'Most worthy opponent,' said Hass beside her. 'Most perfect foe.' He had brought a sword with him, and now the tall gardener raised it over the grave. Bernice had studied Martian death rites, even written a paper on them. This was an abbreviated form of the Ak'ioak, reserved for enemy kings, beaten and killed in battle. When they had planned the funeral, Bernice had been baffled by the idea. Hass had explained, though, that friends and allies got the paltrier send-offs. She had wanted something special, and Martians went to town mourning those they had fought. His was a warrior culture, after all.

He knelt — not easy to do in his cold-suit — and laid the sword across the grave, surrendering it. He muttered a prayer in High Martian. Something about wanting a rematch when they met in the afterlife.

No one else had come. No one else understood her grief. They hardly acknowledged it. Jason had made lame jokes. Peter had cried when she had explained what had happened, but he didn't really understand. He was too young. Joseph just talked about practicalities: resources would be affected with one fewer of them.

Bev Tarrant had outright laughed when she heard the news. Bernice couldn't forgive her that. She knew Bev wasn't trying to be callous, that she had seen a lot of suffering, a lot of death. It was so soon after Clarissa. Yet to actually laugh... That was just cruel. Even Adrian had shrugged when she told him. It wasn't just loyalty to Bev — though he was never far from her these days. He'd not miss Wolsey either.

Even Braxiatel had failed her. It had taken her long enough to find

him, just to tell him the news. For the last few weeks, he'd been caught up in some horrific argument with Hass's brother. They spent hours over the v-screens, trading barbed pleasantries, comparing archaic law. At the root of the discussions were some ancient Martian artefacts the Collection shouldn't really have. Hass's brother wanted them back on Mars. Brax wasn't even letting on exactly what artefacts he possessed. It was all proving messy and complex.

Then, on the morning of the funeral, he had called her up, made an appointment. He made time for her, though he didn't disguise how precious that time was. He made tea, and listened as she poured out her woe, lending his handkerchief when she needed it. His manners could not be faulted.

'He didn't suffer,' he said. 'That's to be remembered.'

'No,' said Bernice. She knew that. Of course she knew that.

'And he was hardly a kitten when you took him on.'

She didn't reply.

'That was, what, ten years ago? Relatively, of course.'

'Twelve. I counted. I know he couldn't live forever.'

'It's a new page, Bernice. The passing from one age to another...'

'Don't lecture me on history,' she snapped. She hated him for being so glib, so clinical. Couldn't he see what this was doing to her? She felt hollowed out, bereft. He had never considered her feelings, seemed incapable of empathy. Now he made light of her grief, used it as an excuse to philosophise.

Her words stung him. He sipped his tea. It hid his expression, and allowed him a moment to think.

'You need something to keep you occupied,' he said at last. 'Something to take your mind off it.'

'I need some time off...'

'Nonsense. Skulking around on your own won't help you. Activity, a problem to solve. That's what's called for.'

'And you have just the thing, I suppose?' She felt her whole body sag, resigned to the inevitable. He'd called her here for a reason. Brax always got his own way.

There was no point in arguing.

'Got a chap just started here, working on a history machine. I'm meant to keep an eye on him. Why don't you take him on?'

'A history machine?'

'That's what it said in his application.'

'And how long has he been here?'

Braxiatel put down his teacup and strolled over to the desk. He flicked through a small stack of papers, then seemed to discover the one right on top.

'Well, I never,' he said. 'He touches down later today.'

The Collection's spaceport bustled and shoved. Bernice had come straight from the funeral and didn't want to be around anyone. She searched for a nook she could hide in. People of all species jostled into her. You could tell the new arrivals from those about to leave. The new ones stood in your way, looking all round them, wide-eyed. They hadn't even got out of the spaceport building yet. Wait till they saw the horizon.

She found a corner, across from the arrivals hall. People still pushed past her, but less so than out in the open. She scanned the boards detailing arrivals, reading the words though not taking them in. The flight she was after had landed. Her quarry would be meeting his bags.

A drone floated by, offering her coffee. She felt she'd been awake too long as it was. What sleep she'd had in the last week had been plagued by indistinct phantoms. She accepted a latte. It tasted bitter, made her wince. The drone informed her drily that the cost would be filed against her departmental budget. Bernice hadn't known she had one.

She drank the coffee, warming to it with each sip. People milled around her and she watched them, reading their lives. A Galyari in a long robe tried not to appear lost. A woman, fleeing something awful in her life, was now having second thoughts. A young Cahlian scratched at his armpit as he stared back at Bernice.

She looked quickly away. The man came towards her. Humanoid, with fiery-coloured skin, Cahlians were often immaculate. This one, though, could have slept in his clothes. There were stains down the front of his shirt where he'd spilled several meals. He needed a shave, and to brush his hair, and to wash on a more regular basis. She looked anywhere but in his direction. Still he kept coming.

'Professor Summerfield?' he said. His smile was disarming, radiant. Without wanting to, Bernice smiled back.

'Benny,' she said. 'Mr Dog-less?'

'Doggles is better,' he said. 'Like "goggles".'

'I'm sorry,' she said, cursing Braxiatel. He'd set her up for this. He could at least have got the man's name right. Though he might have done this on purpose, to break the ice between them. Damn him. It was the last thing she needed.

'Dog-less is how the characters translate,' he explained. 'But Doggles doesn't make people laugh.' His pink eyes twinkled at her mischievously. Any other day she might have liked him.

'I'm to take you to your rooms in the hamlet,' she said. 'I'm sure you'll want to have a wash, get changed.' Frankly, she thought, he stank.

'I'm okay,' he said. 'Want to get cracking.'

He didn't have luggage. It would follow, he said. She had organised a flyer on the basis he'd have bags. They went outside, and she explained to the pilot. He swore at her. Bernice clammed up, stood there hardly aware of him yelling at her. Her whole body felt numb. Doggles got involved, and he knew how to argue. The pilot backed away. Doggles stuck his hands into his baggy trouser pockets.

'Thank you,' she said.

'What now?' he asked, as if nothing had happened.

'We'll walk to the hamlet, I think. It's not far. I can do the tour.'

He liked the gardens best of all. Since they were going that way, she took him round to the greenhouses to meet Hass. It meant she could see the grave again. Besides, she had an ongoing mission where Hass was concerned. He could now go whole minutes with strangers, without once being rude. Doggles, it turned out, knew Hass's work. He had read his papers on Martian moss. Not even Bernice, at her most desperate, had read those. They were highly technical, often abstract and, fundamentally, dull. Doggles knew the work well enough to ask questions. Hass tried at first to brush him aside, but there was nothing Doggles hadn't read. They were soon on to microbiology and something called terroir. Bernice had never heard Hass laugh before. His hulking great body shook as he chuckled. Somewhere in the midst of an equation, Doggles had planted a pun.

Hass had work to get on with, though. He took Bernice aside for a moment. She expected him to reveal what he really thought of the new arrival.

'You should go home,' he said. Again, only he had seen what was happening to her. She put her arms round him. His cold-suit was hard and unyielding, his body bizarrely chill on such a warm day. He stood there, letting her hug him, not knowing quite what to do. Bless him, she thought.

'You two want me to bugger off?' said a voice. Doggles had followed them. Bernice let Hass go, and he couldn't get away from her quickly enough. She turned to the Cahlian.

'Let's find something to keep you occupied,' she said.

'Where are those two going together?' asked Bev Tarrant.

Of late, she and Adrian always had lunch together at the Cafe Vosta. They would sit at the same table, passing comment on the world as they ate. Today, Bev had a mixed salad. Adrian had the most enormous steak. He had to keep his strength up. She hadn't believed what the Killorans got through when they were working. A few lunches with Adrian had put her right.

Adrian looked up, to where she had indicated. Bernice and Hass were walking back to the Mansionhouse. Hass had his arm round

Bernice. She looked sickly. A red-skinned somebody trotted along behind them.

‘They’ve been and buried the cat,’ said Adrian after a moment. ‘Hass was digging the hole.’

Bev said nothing.

‘It meant a lot to her.’

‘Why do you always take her side?’ she snapped. It wasn’t true, she knew as she said it. Yes, Adrian was always torn when Bernice’s name was mentioned. They had had something between them, years ago, before Bev had appeared on the scene. They had had Peter between them. Then Bernice had dumped Adrian, and picked up Jason. Men were strewn behind that woman like wreckage. Adrian still held a candle for her, the poor sap. But he had got better about it in the last year or so. He criticised her. He had told her what he thought about Clarissa, how Bernice had been to blame. Partly to blame, anyway. He stuck up for Bev, too, when Bernice stuck her nose in.

Yet still, that past they shared... Bev bristled at the thought.

‘She’s never liked me,’ she said. ‘You know that.’

‘She’s envious, that’s all. You’re Mr Braxiatel’s number one. She used to be his confidant.’

‘He doesn’t tell me anything!’

‘Benny doesn’t know that. You’re similar in lots of ways.’

‘It’s not just Brax. She hates me being here. She resents me making decisions about the Collection. She’s even jealous of me seeing you.’

‘You’re not seeing me, Bev.’

‘Spending time with you. Having this...’ she gestured at the simple meal before them.

They sat there for a moment. Adrian looked awkward. She had said too much, he didn’t like the emotional stuff. That was half the appeal. They talked about things and work and what *needed* doing. She didn’t have to think about what it all meant, how he might see it.

He reached forward and took her hand. Without realising, she had been playing with her fringe. It was a nervous tic of hers. She would hook her hair behind her ear, keeping it out of her eyes. Then she would pull it back again, hiding the scars on her forehead and face. He was the one who’d first mentioned it to her. She hoped nobody else had noticed.

‘Sorry,’ she said, all self-conscious. Adrian held on to her hand.

‘We spend a lot of time together,’ he said.

‘Stop it,’ she said, yanking her hand away.

‘I’m serious,’ he said. ‘Bev, would you consent to...’

The waiter chose that exact moment to clear their plates.

Jason just liked having some way to help out. Benny was in pieces.

Anything he could do he'd do gladly. He hated seeing her upset. He hated not being able to reach out to her. She didn't respond to anything he'd tried. She didn't want him to cook dinner. She didn't want him to run a bath. She didn't want him anywhere near her. He should have kept his own rooms, he thought. Now they lived together, it was easier for him to piss her off. Joseph, ever tactful, had said as much.

Collecting Peter from school, though, that was something he could do. When she'd first said about the burying, he'd been able to remind her that Peter finished early every Wednesday. She looked stricken at this, and he quickly offered to step in for her. He could help, he could do something, it would all be all right. She nodded, said thank you, and hurried off for another cry.

In fact, he now realised, Benny could have made it. Peter didn't finish early on Wednesdays. He had done once, the last time Jason had collected him. Jason had got it wrong that time, caused something of a panic. They had called Benny while she'd been off on a dig. On another planet, of course. She'd come pegging it back across space and time, but by then Jason had been there, got Peter home and made up for it all by feeding him fish fingers. No cause for alarm, he'd said. No need to panic. He'd not been her favourite boyfriend for a month.

So, he told himself, turning up early this time was good. It showed responsibility. He sat outside the classroom and waited. He had wanted to sit by the window, to watch the class, but Nryn said he distracted the children. They watched him pulling funny faces when they were meant to be watching the blackboard. He thought they were a bit young to learn telling the time, he said. And anyway, he hadn't been pulling funny faces. He'd just been himself.

Nryn had found him a seat, well out of the way. She had given him a magazine to read, one with digital pages that refilled as you read them. It would take him weeks to read it all, and class only went on for an hour. Nryn made a good schoolmarm, especially when scolding grown-ups. It wasn't until she was back in the classroom he thought of a rebuke. She was a criminal, after all. He should have reminded her of that. Found guilty, a year ago, of running a nursery under false pretences. She might look like an old lady with whopping great tits, but she came from another dimension. She was a major in some alien military, and she'd been caught doing weird tests on kids. Ha! thought Jason. Not so superior really.

Of course, she was still in charge of the school. Typical Brax solution, that. The Collection needed to take on the kids, and Nryn had a rapport with them. Her own people had abandoned her, and what good did it do anyone, having her locked up in a cell? She

promised to forgo the weird tests, and Brax gave her the school. 'Community service', he called it. They kept a close eye on her at first, but what concerns there had been were soon quashed. The kids loved her, and it didn't do to argue with them.

Other parents appeared. They talked amongst themselves, chatting, giggling, keeping away from Jason. He had a reputation with the ladies, he knew. They couldn't help themselves.

'You're Peter's other dad?' said one of the women. She stayed where she was, across the room.

'Yeah. Jason.'

'Peter's adorable,' the woman said.

'He'll break a few hearts when he's older,' Jason agreed.

The women tittered again, whispering. Jason began to feel silly. He thought it best to read his magazine. His cheeks burnt as the women discussed him, just out of his hearing.

The children burst from the classroom, a great wave of noise and activity. They threw themselves at their parents and carers. They had drawings to show off, adventures to tell. Peter stalked over to Jason.

'It's you,' he said, sadly. Jason felt his grin falter.

'I'm not so bad, am I?'

'Mummy has you for other things.'

'That's right,' said Jason, not sure what that meant. 'I'm Mummy's handy man.'

'But Daddy makes bedrooms,' said Peter, wrinkling up his furry face. That expression meant he was being serious.

'Yes, well, that's Daddy's job.' Jason had loved the days when he'd been 'Daddy' too. Now Peter could tell him and Adrian apart, he hadn't decided what to call Jason yet. Instead, he'd avoid calling him anything.

'He's bigger than you,' said Peter, prodding Jason with a finger. He needed his claws cutting back again.

'Yes, he is. Killorans are bigger than Humans.' They had this discussion a lot. Peter was a head taller than his classmates, though the youngest in class.

'So he makes good bedrooms,' Peter continued, his logic infallible. 'The mummies all want Daddy to make bedrooms for them, too.'

Jason blinked, translating in his head. 'What? Who told you that?'

'Everyone,' said Peter, gloomily.

Jason looked quickly back round at the other parents. They scooped up their children and carried them off. Only Jason had time to sit, to listen to the little ones like they were important. Not one of the mothers looked back at him.

So Adrian was bigger in the bedroom. It was such a silly thing to be worried about, so twentieth century. Day by day, the Collection got

more like a village, brimming with intrigue and prejudice. He had heard some of it himself. Adrian had caused a stir, being seen out with Bev all the time. After his thing with Benny, it looked like the poor guy went for human girls. Especially the difficult ones.

‘I love Mummy,’ Jason told him. ‘And she loves me. That’s all that matters.’ Peter considered this, then reached his arms out for a hug. ‘I love you too,’ he purred, ‘Jason.’

‘And did Ms Tarrant acquiesce?’

Bernice had been kept waiting half an hour. She took her usual spot, under the Masaccio in the hall. Braxiatel arrived during her second cup of tea. He seeped apologies. Talks with the Martians were still dragging on. His personal assistant was not back from lunch, and he’d quite lost all sense of time. Bernice raised an eyebrow, knowing him incapable of such a thing. She told him where Bev had been seen. To her amazement, Braxiatel was all ears. She had come to update him on Doggles and his work, but Bernice soon found herself feeding him every scrap of tittle-tattle she had. It quite surprised her how much she knew. She thought she’d not been listening.

‘He definitely made an advance,’ she said. ‘And they’re still enjoying each other’s company. A lot. Whether they’re an item...’

‘It’s charming,’ he said. ‘I hope that she’s happy.’

‘You could ask her.’

‘You think she’d tell me?’

‘You could ask Adrian. You see him at least as often as she does.’

‘I wouldn’t want to pry. And besides, I do not.’

‘Oh, come on. You’ve got him working on something. Something big. Something secret. Doggles says he’s had to schedule his tests around you. What’s that about?’

‘If it *were* a secret, I’d hardly tell you —’

‘Brax!’

He sighed. ‘Adrian is shoring up our defences,’ he said. ‘We’ve taken a proactive approach to security.’

‘But you’ve opened the place up to the universe.’

‘Precisely why we need some added protection. We’ve merely expanded some elements so that they cover the whole Collection. The egalitarian approach, don’t you think?’

‘So why keep it secret?’

‘My dear Bernice, the thing about being impregnable is that *everyone* wants a pop at you. Take my own civilisation. Vast, unscalable, and a would-be invasion every week. It’s really quite distressing.’

‘They get by, as I remember. Anyone who gets too near them they quietly erase from history.’

‘Yes,’ smiled Braxiatel, as if she’d been joking. ‘It’s so tedious. Now, Mr Doggles. How’s he shaping up?’

‘That’s another thing we need to have words about.’

‘Really?’

‘You didn’t tell me what he was working on.’

‘I’m sure I did. A history machine.’

‘Based on technology left over from the Occupation. We’ve been through this before, Brax.’

‘It’s not weapons-based technology, Bernice.’

‘It’s still dangerous.’

‘Potentially dangerous. That’s why you’re overseeing it. I trust you.’

‘I don’t understand what he’s doing, Brax. It’s way over my head. And my head’s not really in a good state anyway...’

‘You’re coping superbly. I gather the funeral went well?’

‘That was weeks ago!’

‘Well, I have been rather caught up with matters. But it was good?’

‘Oh, yes,’ Bernice muttered. ‘Huge turn-out.’

‘He was a very popular fellow. I’m sorry my work kept me here.’

‘You’ve time to chat, though.’

‘Not really, but Sset needs his beauty sleep every so often. So tell me about your preparations for the press.’

‘You didn’t mention that before, either. Doggles has friends in the media. It’s going to be a circus.’

‘I always love a circus.’

‘There’ll be hundreds of people here. I’ll do a speech —’

‘I know how you love to give speeches.’

‘And then he’ll show off what he’s made.’

‘It all sounds positively thrilling, Benny. You should be proud.’

‘So you’ll come down for it?’

‘I regret not. Negotiations are going to take weeks, even when we stay up all night.’ He finished his tea, and absently glanced at his watch. ‘Sset will be up again soon,’ he said. ‘You’ll have to excuse me...’

Bernice got wearily to her feet. She was in no mood to fight him. He always won. ‘I thought you’d be there,’ she said. ‘To ensure it all went okay...’

‘Bernice.’ He laughed. ‘What could possibly go wrong?’

‘I hope it *doesn’t* work,’ Bernice announced. The assembled guests gaped back at her. She almost felt the cameras zoom in. All the major networks were here. Spaceships crowded into the Collection’s orbit, relaying her words out across the cosmos. People at home, billions of them, would be gaping at her, too. She liked to cause a stir. ‘If it does work, I’m out of a job!’

No one laughed. Not even her friends or her students, who she had carefully sat at strategic intervals all through the crowd. They had assembled outside, on one of the lawns. Hass had been peeved by the prospect of so many people trampling the grass.

Bernice, who owed him so much, had explained how it would make it easier to fit everyone in. He had gone off in a sulk. She could do nothing right these days, she was all sixes and sevens. Up on the makeshift stage, all eyes upon her, she needed her friends. She persevered.

‘History, as a discipline, compares *accounts* of events. Often, those accounts are contradictory. We are trained to evaluate them, compare them, assess them. And somewhere, in between their varied perspectives, we find a truth.’

She turned to Doggles. He grinned back at her. He had not shaved, but he had conceded to wear a clean shirt. Within minutes, he had spilt something down the front. She thought he might have done it on purpose.

‘This man,’ she went on, ‘promises to do away with all that. Now when we want to see what something was like, why it happened, we just turn on his machine. It won’t show us an account, it’ll show us how it was. It’ll put an end to the arguments and answer all the questions. It will close all the history departments.’

To her surprise, that got a cheer. She spotted the culprits. Her own students had betrayed her. Bev and Adrian, sat together at the back, also looked guilty. Perhaps, she thought, they’d been kissing.

‘Sod it,’ she said. ‘Turn the thing on.’

The assembled guests applauded. They had been cued to do so.

Doggles worked the controls, as if playing a musical instrument. He had a real flair for showmanship. That’s why the journalists loved him. They just had to point a camera his way and — barn! — great TV.

Bernice went back to her seat. Jason and Peter sat right behind her. She’d hoped Peter would like the machine. He liked built things. He was more interested, though, in Jason. Jason was the one who wanted to watch.

The machine stood tall in the centre of the stage. It didn’t look much. A metal sphere, taller than the Killorans who had got it here. In the middle, a small, round screen. She wondered how many could see it. Doggles could show them anything, and they’d think it had worked. He was a conjuror, not a scientist. A conman.

The screen twitched into life. Static patterned across it. Then greyness. Bernice realised she was staring at tones, not colours. It had been a long time, centuries by some reckoning, since she’d last seen black-and-white telly.

A blob of white appeared on-screen, streaking from dead centre downwards. The picture had no sound.

‘I’ll tune it in,’ Doggles explained, ‘and then we’ll see something special.’ He didn’t touch the controls though. Bernice seemed to be the only one to notice. The crowd sat in his hand, captivated by the strange shapes on-screen. The blob warped. More white shapes erupted around it.

‘Just a second...’ Doggles said. He didn’t sound quite so sure.

Something didn’t feel right. Bernice looked quickly to Jason. He sensed it, too. Bernice had icy tingles all through her. She’d had the same whenever they used the time rings. She’d had the same when she’d travelled with the —

‘Stop,’ she shouted. ‘Turn it off!’

‘The subsections in Clause 3 include specific definitions of...’ He trailed off, touched his temple with a finger.

Sset peered at Braxiatel. ‘What issss it?’ he hissed. The v-screen crackled with static. The signal reached all the way from Mars.

Braxiatel’s voiced cracked. He glanced round at his office. On the mantelpiece, in front of the great, ornate mirror, a carved figure grappled with a bell larger than he was. The statue was Japanese, fifth century, unique.

‘Something...’ said Braxiatel. ‘I can feel it.’

The bell chimed. Its tone was deep, sonorous. It chimed again.

Braxiatel leapt to his feet. He ran to the door...

Bernice raced towards the machine. She shouted, pushing her way through the crowd.

‘Switch it off!’ she cried again.

Doggles tried to stop her. This was his moment of glory. She fainted to her right, then darted left around him.

On the screen, the white shapes grew in number and intensity. White light bled from the screen.

Bernice reached the controls, tugged at the levers. They made no difference! The light radiated out around her. Onlookers cried out. A camera lens shattered. ‘This isn’t what’s meant to happen,’ she heard Doggles say.

She looked back at the machine. The light blinded her. The machine cracked, the whiteness surging out. It exploded.

Bernice screamed as the light engulfed her.

Chapters Two

Siege Mentality

By James Swallow

She could see horrible things within the white light. Shapes of people that she knew, some of them turning inside out with the shock of it, others falling into ashen fragments flensed from bone.

Bernice saw Waxpool, a transfer student out of Rocene, wail and die as bolts of colour ripped into him. Oscarby Stendurp from Allocations tore pieces from his face and gouged out his eyes. Thessaly — nasty little Thessaly who cheated at poker, there with her ugly tyke of a child — both of them vanished under a falling birch tree. Bernice tried to run from the storm of whiteness boiling from the machine, but the air about her was thick and glutinous. She moved like she was underwater, slow, ponderous, drowning.

Jason's bright shirt flashed at the corner of her vision. He was moving with agonising speed towards the ground, rolling over Peter to protect him. Her son's fingernail-sized fangs caught the light as he cried out for her. Beyond them, Bev Tarrant was sprawled across the folding chairs, a dart of sluggish flame licking at her back. For a second, Bernice made eye contact with Adrian as the Killoran bent down, arms bunching to haul Bev to safety.

Then a column of ozone ripped the breath from her lungs as lightning, sun-bright and fast, tore past and hit Adrian in the head. She saw the white of his skull emerge as skin and fur were charred away.

In the slowness of it, something inside Bernice was screaming and screaming and screaming.

The smell of wet mud reminded her of damp afternoons and daytrips turned dreary. Bernice's hands were filthy, tanned rust brown by the determined dirt of the planetoid. She tried to wipe the sheen of sweat from her forehead and succeeded only in adding a russet streak to the sleeve of her soiled shirt. She let out a weary moan.

'Stand up for a moment, if you need it,' Jason said lightly. 'Take a spell.'

Bernice didn't want to — it made her feel weak and soft — but she did anyway, coming up from the makeshift ditch. Her back popped and the knots of tension there went slack for a few blessed moments. Shielding her eyes from the sunlight, Bernice scanned the length of the ditch down toward the hamlet. It was a violent slash of dark earth across the middle of the manicured croquet lawns, dozens of people

bent over it at work like medical spiders suturing a wound. The pipe in the ditch was a stark yellow, broken now and then by fists of white caulking. At her feet, Jason had a squirtgun filled with the same stuff, using it to seal holes. He seemed focused, sensible. She envied him.

On some level, Bernice was confused by her reaction to the devastation. After all, the hamlet was as unspecial and ordinary as any aspect of the Collection could be; yet the damage done to it struck her with the most force. She had seen one of her students burst into tears at the ruins of the Grand Trianon and felt nothing. But this... The simple little village was real to her, normal. Once, on Earth, she had seen a makeshift community of grounded trailers chewed up in the teeth of a hurricane. Some of the flimsy boxes had been split into matchwood while others were utterly untouched, flags on their tin roofs barely sent flapping by the wind. Similar random patterns of destruction lay across the landscape of the Collection, chaotic and fickle. The energy surge had swept over the hamlet in a ragged impulse of light and sound, tearing at it like a mad animal. There had been deaths there, a good third of the fatalities from the fallout. The rest were mostly the crews of the media ships in orbit, shattered by the shockwaves or thrown into one another in their lethal wake. A vessel from SNN's stringer fleet had fallen into the ground by the lake and still stood there, like a giant lost lawn dart.

The pipe grumbled and people all along the length of it gave a wan cheer. Bernice dropped to her haunches and helped Jason pull the clamps tight. The plastic went cold beneath her fingers and she blew out a breath. 'We've got water.'

'Another job done.' Jason managed a smile. He was good that way.

It helped Bernice blink away a little of the numbness that enveloped her. Lately, it seemed as if someone had turned down the volume on the world, as if everything was dislocated. Everyone was the same, faces flat and haunted, pulling together to pick through the wreckage and pitch their lives back together. It would be churlish not to join in.

Someone nearby was talking about relief ships on their way from Shenlong Station. Bernice sniffed. In her experience, those who sat and waited for help to arrive usually died of it. The truth was, the garbled signals that reached the Collection from the galaxy at large showed that people out there had suffered just as much as those down here. The shockwave hadn't dissipated; it had just kept on going.

Jason stood up and twirled the caulking gun like a trick-shooter. 'Shall we go drink a cup in celebration?' He nodded in the direction of the hamlet and the train of untidy people trickling toward it.

In spite of herself, Bernice shivered. Thoughts of tornadoes and lightning prickled her mind. 'No,' she said, too quickly, 'I'm going to check to see if the, uh, food, is...'

‘Okay.’ He gave her hand a squeeze and then he was walking away. ‘Be safe,’ Jason threw the words over his shoulder.

Bernice’s face wrinkled. She made for the broken tree line and the fractured domes of the spaceport beyond.

The colony of tents had spread like fungi across the flyer pads, white bubblepods mingling with gaily painted things for children’s excursions and the vivid orange of inflatable rescue shelters. The infirmary burst its banks and sent the overflow here. Bernice had donated Joseph and allowed one of Braxiatel’s technical aces to retrofit him for medical duties. Somewhere in there the drone was bobbing around dispensing calmatives.

Bernice sighed. She was doing a lot of that lately. You couldn’t hide from the aftermath. The planetoid was just too small. Sooner or later, the wind would blow the wrong way and you could smell burnt wood or hear the people’s voices. Here it was in your face. The elaborate dome and the glassy crenulations of the port were gone, vanished into piles of rubble that had suffocated the shuttle hangars. There were people working on the communications spire, but Bernice saw it as a fruitless, make-work endeavour. There were too many people with too much invested in seeing the Braxiatel Collection come to ruin, too many scores left unsettled. The Collection was hobbled and begging for help, and all its enemies needed to do now was nothing. All those people Bernice and Brax had pissed off were going to watch them choke on stale air, starve or freeze, as a disaster of their own making killed them by inches.

‘Professor Summerfield!’ Bernice flinched to hear her name bellowed out across the open wards. A student bounded over, pale and nervous. ‘Professor. Hello. The food stocks.’

‘Parasiel,’ Bernice replied, faintly relieved to see the lad was uninjured, and more that he wasn’t shirking, ‘Right. What did you get?’ She had press-ganged her more intelligent pupils into scouring the outbuildings for supplies. If they were going to be isolated for a while, it was essential that anything left to eat on the planetoid be rationed out.

Parasiel wore an overly serious face as he gave his report. ‘Good haul from the larders at Cafe Vosta. Haven’t spoken to Brax’s cook yet, though —’

‘Don’t bother him,’ Bernice broke in, on an impulse she wasn’t entirely sure of. ‘I’ll talk to Brax. Get everything together.’

A grim nod. ‘And then what?’

‘I don’t know, make sure no one eats it all.’

‘You’ve got a lot of nerve coming here.’ Bev Tarrant strode over, flushed with anger; it boiled red in her cheeks and the balling of her

fists.

'Oh, Bev,' Bernice went cold inside. 'How is...' She stumbled over the name. 'Adrian?'

'You want to see?' spat the woman. 'Take a look.' She grabbed Bernice's forearm and did something to a nerve cluster in Bernice's flesh. Her right arm shot through with pins and needles. Before she could complain, Bev was weaving her between temporary beds shaded from the sun with tarps.

And there was Adrian. The Killoran's huge chest rose and fell in shallow stutters, a rebreather clasped across his snout like a smothering hand. His fur was lank and he looked old. Most of his face was unseen beneath a turban of plastic nano-bandages and for that Bernice was thankful. Adrian had lost a lot of flesh where the energy surge had clipped him.

'He's going to die,' Bev spat, and Bernice's heart shrank. 'Because of you.' Words tumbled from her mouth. 'I didn't —'

Bev's face was suddenly inches away, breath hot and stale. 'You were supposed to keep an eye on that day-glo idiot! You were supposed to watch him!' She blinked furiously, arms wide to take in the whole of the makeshift hospital. 'Look what you did, Summerfield!'

'Are you finished?' Bernice managed. 'Or do you think I need to be hurt some more?' She nodded at Adrian, at the ruined face of her son's father.

'Go away,' said Bev, her rage disintegrating. 'Just go away.'

Doggles perched on the broken bench like a morose gargoyle, kneading the wrought-iron armrests and peering at the near-distant shape of the Mansionhouse. 'What?' he demanded. 'I'm busy.'

The Summerfield woman sneered. 'You look it. Where have you been? We could have used some help with the pipe...'

Doggles shook his head. 'I'll keep my own company, thank you.' He got up suddenly. 'Thank you.'

The woman's eyes narrowed, and her scrutiny made his skin itch. 'I think you could do some good here. After...' She swallowed. 'Well, all those people you know at the newsnets, your media friends? We're having difficulty getting supplies —'

'No one cares,' Doggles said bluntly, 'they don't want to get dirty. Don't want to be seen to be connected.' He made an interweaving gesture with his fingers.

Bernice's manner hardened. 'Doggles, look at me. People are going to start dying if we don't get relief soon. You said you have contacts, can't you get the word out?'

'What makes you think I should?' Another weak wave of the hand.

‘Not really for the best, is it? Such a spectacular failure, I don’t know if I should draw more attention to it.’ Doggles looked away, mumbling. ‘Don’t know at all.’

‘This isn’t about you!’ she snapped. ‘You conceited little shit! Lives are at stake here, my friends, my son!’

He didn’t hear her. ‘It’s all about me. That’s how it will look. The blame will lie right here.’ Doggles began to wander away, distracted and lost in his own musings. ‘It doesn’t matter about the other factors, they’ll see it as me.’ He gave her a sharp glare. She simply could not, did not want to understand. He was the victim here. ‘There were other variables at hand, Professor. I wasn’t told. I was not told!’

Jason almost missed her in the lengthening shadows. The artificial day was fading into a haze of twilight, shrouding the alleys of the tent city.

‘Benny?’ He deposited the plastic girder he’d been carrying and gave her his full attention.

She looked up at him; he knew the expression of old. Whenever Bernice faced something that she couldn’t surmount, she got that look. Kind of sad-angry, fierce-hurt. It automatically pushed the emotional button in his male psyche labelled ‘White Knight’, made him want to do something comforting. ‘Need a cuddle?’ he asked.

Bernice stood up and shook her head. ‘A stiff one would be better...’

‘Ah.’ Jason produced a small hipflask and offered it. ‘Ladies first.’

‘Where did you get that?’ She took a pull.

‘Um. Caretaker’s Cottage. Not much else left intact.’

Bernice winced at that, then took another go. ‘That’s tragic.’ He could tell the alcohol was burning hard in her chest, but she covered it well. The flask seemed odd in her hands, as if it belonged to a different sort of Benny. One he’d not seen in years. She handed it back to Jason and nodded at the girder. ‘What’s this?’

‘For the school. Nryn needs some help. I said okay.’

‘School,’ Bernice considered. ‘That’s an idea.’

Jason nodded. It had been hard trying to explain to Peter what it was that had actually happened, and why it was he couldn’t see his father. Giving the children some part of their routine back would only be a good thing.

‘Did you find Doggy?’

‘Doggles. Yes, sort of. He’s worse than useless. He’s fallen to bits.’ She made a winding-up motion near her temple.

Jason nodded. ‘Lot of that about. Doesn’t leave us with many options. There’s already been another gravity outage near the stables. We still haven’t patched all the air leaks yet. There’s a team of Killoran labourers at work around the clock on the oxygen processors.’

Bernice's frown deepened. 'We can't go on like this, just waiting for our options to run out.' She turned to walk away, then ducked back and planted a kiss on Jason's cheek.

'What was that for?'

'In case,' she replied, walking off over the mangled lawns toward the Mansionhouse.

The most untoward thing inside Braxiatel's home was the way that nothing was broken, but that all of it was just ever so slightly askew. The Masaccio in the hall seemed off-kilter by a fraction and Benny had to put her hands in her pockets to deflect the urge to right it.

She followed the hum of intense conversation to the inner rooms. Hass was there; Bernice couldn't think of a time when the breathy rumour of his voice had been pitched with such annoyance.

'The lightness you display towards this matter concerns me,' the gardener hissed. 'All that is required from you is a moment to contact Sset and request an adjournment in negotiations —'

For the fourth time, your unease has been noted,' Braxiatel's retort was clipped and bullet-fast. 'Good evening, Hass.' He leaned closer to the ornate mirror dominating the far wall and peered closely at his own reflection. 'Sset will see your refusal to communicate as a statement of defiance,' pressed the Martian. 'A most grave insult.'

'More important affairs than some warrior's gewgaws require my attention...' Braxiatel's voice trailed off as he noticed their audience. 'Ah. Bernice. Come in. Hass was just leaving.'

'No,' insisted the gardener, 'I was not. My brother will react poorly to this gesture of disrespect toward him. By clan rules, your behaviour can be answered with military force.'

'I'll come back later —' Bernice's voice got lost somewhere crossing the room.

Braxiatel tapped the surface of the mirror with a loud clack and looked away. 'Oh, please, don't be so melodramatic!' He gave an arch sniff. 'This conversation is over. I wouldn't want to keep you from the demands of your flowerbeds.'

Hass reacted to the barb with a physical jerk; then his lips thinned and he stalked from the room in a cold cloud of ire.

'Take a seat, Bernice.' Braxiatel beckoned her in as if nothing had happened. He returned to his contemplation of the silver looking glass. 'I'm afraid I won't be able to spare you much of myself. Affairs of state, you understand.' She could feel his attention waning by the second.

'Brax, what was that about? I thought you had things well on the way to being sorted with Sset...'

'Is there an echo in here?' Braxiatel looked around the room. 'I'm

through playing word-games with that faded old warlord. There are things to do.'

'Yes,' said Bernice, 'but Hass is right. Sset might, I don't know, take the gloves off.'

'Bernice.' Braxiatel said her name like a command. 'What do you want?'

She felt like a schoolgirl in the headmaster's office and shook off the sensation with a grimace. 'Things to do, you said. Yes, absolutely. Have you been outside in the last couple of days?'

'I'm going to pop to the stables on Wednesday.'

'Today is Friday, Brax. Where have you been? You're so invisible, some people think you were killed in the shockwave.'

'I've never been better.' He cocked his head, and for the briefest of instants it seemed like his reflection lagged a heartbeat behind. 'Does this discussion have a point?'

'It's all coming apart out there!' Bernice snapped. 'Air leaks, water shortages, no food. And... And frankly, you don't seem to be doing a bloody thing about it!'

'My dear,' said Braxiatel, and the temperature in the room dipped by degrees, 'I know exactly, precisely what transpires throughout the Collection, and exactly what sort of silly little conspiracies and rumours flutter around it.'

'What?'

'I have to take steps,' and he almost growled the words, 'keep things on an even keel. You know how malleable perceptions can be, Bernice. The real can be like tallow, stretching, changing...'

'Brax, I'm not following you.'

'No, but you will. Everyone will follow me once things have been cleared up.' He tapped a finger on his pursed lips, eyes focused on some distant point. 'This is only how it seems to you right now, Bernice. Point of fact, if we were talking about a weaponised form of reality matrix, things would be the same, but different.'

She shook her head. 'Are we having the same conversation? You've lost me. I'm talking about the Collection, about everyone! We need to get help!'

Braxiatel met her gaze and Bernice felt ice in the pit of her stomach. There was a vast, alien distance in his eyes that made her feel small and primitive. 'Yes,' he agreed, 'I'm sure you do.' He looked back at the mirror. 'Close the door on the way out, there's a good girl.'

She ran to catch up with Hass and found him at the foot of a stand of firs. He was trimming off burnt patches of bark with the clinical dexterity of a surgeon.

'Did Brax exchange his brain for a cage with a tweeting bird in it?'

Bernice said without preamble. 'Sometimes he's hard to work with but that... I don't know who I was talking to in there.'

Hass didn't look at her. 'It is the machine that is the cause.'

She shrugged. 'I'll admit that some people have been acting oddly since the stupid thing exploded, but then they have a right to. An energy surge blows your home, your life's work away and you'd be excused for losing some marbles.'

'Mr Braxiatel is placing the Collection in danger. This is atypical. In my considered opinion, the Event has marked him.'

'It marked everyone.' Bernice thought about how poor, solitary Jess Carter had thrown herself off the bell tower hours after the explosion. She'd been in the woods when it happened, the farthest person from ground zero barring the media crews in orbit. And there had been rumours of sudden, brutal dementia among those ships after the blast. She thought out loud. 'Maybe it is proximity. The closer you were to it, the less it affected you?' She snorted. 'That makes no sense at all.'

'So few things in this place do.' A spherical device on Hass's belt chimed and he glanced up into the sky. 'Ships are coming.'

Bernice followed his gaze. 'You think it's your brother?'

'For our sake, I hope not.'

The downdraft from the landers curled the makeshift shelters like flapping pages, and Bev shielded her eyes from the glow of the retrorockets. The four bulbous transport ships wheeled in the sky, searching for somewhere to put down. It was difficult; people were gathering and they were anxious, desperate for food and blankets. Bev saw the dancing dragon sigil of Shenlong Station on the hulls. At least someone had answered their calls for help.

She watched them make landfall on the port apron, settling with a delicacy that belied their obdurate mass. The survivors ran to them as ramps slid open and the first supply boxes were disgorged. 'Mistake...' The voice came from the gurney at her side and Bev started with shock.

'Adrian?' She bent over him, moving the rebreather. 'Ssh. Don't speak. Just rest.' The Killoran was watching the ships and the people. 'Shouldn't let them... Too close.'

Sounds of chaos reached her ears but Bev found she couldn't look away from his face. 'Adrian, it's me.'

He gave her an odd look. 'I know.'

In her chest, the tight knot of dread she'd been carrying broke open and Bev felt a surge of elation run through her. 'I was afraid.'

'It's all right,' he rumbled, 'Thank you.' Adrian sighed and his eyes fluttered. 'Tired.'

Bev saw him dropping back into unconsciousness and took his thick

fingers in her hand. There was a momentary spark of knowing in his look, and then he fell away again, breath rasping and rhythmic.

In the dimness, she was free to wipe her eyes without being seen.

Doggles emerged from the lee of a shattered jumpshuttle and ran towards the cluster of parked transports, embracing the florid pool cast by their landing lights. After ditching the Summerfield woman, he'd spent hours in the rubble of the spaceport, fruitlessly looking for an intact vessel, for something that could get him off this poisonous rock. Doggles wanted to get away from the Collection. He wanted out.

That need was consuming him. He knew that the relief ships would be protected by stun-fields to stop the desperate, like himself, from swarming aboard — he could see some people already lying prone where they'd strayed too near — but Cahlians had a surprisingly good resistance to that sort of thing. He had a fifty, maybe sixty per cent chance of forcing his way into the cargo bay before one of the empty shuttles took off again. Then it would just be a case of convincing the onboard AI not to let him die.

Coming up from behind he had a different view of the landers, and he faltered a step as he realised that there was a fifth ship in the group, smaller than the rest, sleek and raptor-fashion where the transports were pregnant and ugly. There were no code markings and the livery was dull green, unlike the red and gold of the Shenlong ships. More importantly, it didn't have the shimmer of a stunner playing about it.

Doggles sprinted at it and knock-knocked on the fuselage. 'I've got money,' he began, 'Perhaps you'd be willing to consider a passenger —'

The green ship hissed. Along its belly a seam opened like a sword cut. Ropes of glistening organic matter fell out on to the runway. A meat smell touched the Cahlian's nostrils and he backed away. The tubes of veined, bony shapes broke up into serpents, sizzling with noise. Some of them dipped into and out of the ground, shimmering where they phased through the matter. The snake-things turned blind maws of fractal teeth at Doggles, tasting the air around him with threads of cilia. There were hundreds of them. He ran.

The drones moved with lockstep precision across the spaceport, a carpet of writhing vermicular forms in unhurried progress. A bow-wave of panic shot out in front of them; the crowds around the relief ships, the ones who were quick off the mark, broke and fled. The slower people were felled when the snake-things leapt through them, leaving bodies untouched from outside but their innards a mess of distorted flesh. Some of the Collection's citizens, members of muscular species such as Killorans or Gagrants, were immune to the phasing

attacks; so the drones murdered them the old-fashioned way, swarming and biting.

The serpent-forms methodically picked through the rubble of the port, through every outbuilding and dome, looking and tasting and measuring. They didn't find what they wanted, so they went back and ate the ships to excrete more of themselves.

'Brax! Brax!' Bernice hammered on the grand door of the Mansionhouse until her knuckles were raw. The shallow wind carried the sounds of terror from all points of the compass, across the ornamental gardens. She shouted his name again, and mercifully the door gave of its own accord.

Inside, the eerie calm of the lavish halls was like a cold-water shock. Bernice broke into a run, calling at the top of her voice. 'Brax! There's an invasion going on out there! Something on one of the aid ships, snakes...' She fought back a shiver of revulsion. 'They're reproducing, I think... Brax? This isn't some abstract argument, this is real! It's happening now and we have to do something —' Her voice pealed off the walls. The office door was wide open and she barrelled in without slowing down.

For a second Bernice thought the room was empty; but then she saw the door. There had been a fireplace there before, a mantel with a statue and a bell across from the big mirror. Now there was a doorway, an open arch into an annex she had never seen before. It was something she had never got used to, the way that the rooms would occasionally reorder themselves without apparent purpose or instruction.

Inside, a workshop, perhaps. A laboratory. Either or both. Complex webs of machinery and instruments, arcane drifts of circuit boards and the glitter of bioneural processors. It was a still life of an explosion in a computer museum, or the sort of place that chemistry classroom glassware went to die. In the middle of it all, Braxiatel was crouched over the guts of some device. She was a scientist, after a fashion, and although the workings and theories that powered the thing before Braxiatel were utterly outside her experience, Bernice Summerfield had unearthed, been chained to, and set off enough bombs in her life to know one when she saw one. 'You're making a bomb!' she blurted.

'Bernice,' he said around a stylus in his mouth, gesturing with tools in both hands, 'you really should knock before you enter.'

The device resembled an opened body on an operating table, organs still attached by vein and duct spread out around the torso. None of this shocked Benny more than the pictogram impressed on the metal of the framework; the distinctive lightning flash of the Fifth Axis.

'Brax, what the hell are you doing in here?'

‘Working,’ he replied, as if that would explain it. ‘I’ll be finished soon.’

‘The Collection is under attack! There’s an invasion force out there —’

He looked away, dismissing her. ‘It’s not important.’

It was at that moment that she knew Braxiatel had gone off the deep end.

The snakes sent scouts before the body of their main swarm, single serpents with rippling wings that could leap and glide. For the most part they wouldn’t attack, but people in the way of their whip-like sensory cilia got hurt all the same.

Jason became separated from the others until it was just him and Parasiel running through the rows of strawberry cloches. He collided with an orange-skinned man in dirty clothes and the two of them fell into a planter.

‘Aaaa!’ Doggles wailed. ‘Get off!’

‘Trying,’ Jason retorted.

Behind him, Parasiel’s hands flapped like worried birds. The student was trying to look everywhere at once. The snake-thing, a big one, jumped into him from where it had been slithering through the ankle-high plants. It wriggled obscenely through the student’s mass and he twitched and screamed. Doggles joined in.

With a pop of blood bubbles, the snake re-emerged and returned to normal matter density. For Jason and Doggles, there was only the wall of the fruit garden at their backs; they were trapped by it.

Jason said the names of his lover and her son under his breath, scrambling around for something he could use as a weapon. The snake approached, one of the cilia threads absently caressing his leg. Jason went rigid, pain streaking through his nerves where it touched him.

‘Stand aside,’ said Hass, rising over the wall on a small hover-platform. He had a hoe in his claw and he threw it like a spear, bifurcating the snake with one strike. The two halves writhed, grabbing blindly for one another.

‘Come.’ Hass helped them to their feet.

‘Lucky shot,’ piped Doggles.

Hass gave a slow shake of the head. ‘Practice.’

Jason gulped and tried not to throw up from the agony. ‘What are they?’

‘Clades.’ Hass replied, turning toward the Hamlet. ‘Some cultures use them as autonomous battlefield weapons. Quite efficient, in their dishonourable way.’

‘They’re going to overrun the whole planetoid,’ said Doggles. ‘Room by room, building by building.’

‘Looking for something,’ Jason grated.

Hass sighed. ‘Yes. I suspect the clades have been sent to recover the artefacts from my homeworld. They are anonymous and untraceable...’ A tone of disgust entered his voice. ‘A “deniable” form of assault.’

‘Your brother sent them?’

A nod. ‘Mother will be most disappointed in him.’

The Collection’s populace converged on the hamlet through some misplaced sense of safety. There were voices raised and words said about taking a stand, and other similarly foolish sentiments from those who had run from the clades and not seen their touch up close. The walking wounded still dazed from the Event milled among them, drugs in their systems numbing comprehension of what was going on. In the throng, Bernice saw Joseph making steady progress pulling Adrian’s gurney up the cobbled lane. She felt a dart of pointless annoyance at the sight of Bev there, holding his hand and whispering to him.

‘Look out below!’ Jason’s voice drew her attention upward as Hass brought the complaining hover-plat down on the village green. Plumes of smoke emerged from the battery pack; he’d overloaded it with two passengers. Doggles fell off the disc and she ignored him. On impulse Bernice hugged Jason and he wailed.

‘Got stroked by one of them,’ he explained, going pale, ‘Not at all well.’

‘The clades are coming this way,’ Hass said bluntly, and his words carried. ‘We saw them from the air.’ The Martian described an arc from west to east with his claw. ‘They have finished with the storehouses and the archive quarter.’

Bernice looked around. Some hands carried weapons, but nowhere near enough. ‘We can’t stay here.’ She shuddered.

‘Where else can we go?’ Doggles whined.

‘The Mansionhouse.’ She said it without thinking. ‘It’ll be safe there.’

Hass leaned close to her. ‘It will not. Braxiatel —’

‘Devil or the deep blue, Hass!’ she spat back at him, ‘Frying pan, fire! Barn door, horse bolted, doesn’t matter! I’ll think of something!’

Jason blinked, owlish with pain. ‘The kids. Not here.’

Bernice saw Bev approaching from the corner of her eye. ‘Where are they?’

‘Still at the school?’ Bev answered, ‘With Nryn?’ Jason threw her a nod and her face hardened. ‘Right then. Make sure Adrian stays safe, I’ll go back for them.’ She shot a look at Bernice. ‘Can you handle that?’

‘You’re not going on your own,’ Bernice retorted, her mind ten steps behind her mouth. ‘You’re terrible with children.’

On the roof of the schoolhouse, a cluster of young humanoids sat in a circle as Nryn had instructed, some crying and some fretting, all of them afraid. None of the children dared to look over the edge to where the carpet of snakes were massing, shimmering in and out of the walls.

With the careful seriousness that only a child can muster, Peter rejoined his friends and sat down. Tolly, the Vooti girl with blue polyps in her hair, looked up at him. She thought he was very brave to go back down the steps, especially after teacher had forbidden them to do so. ‘Where is Nryn?’

Peter chewed at a claw, thinking. ‘Sleeping on the floor. There were snakes.’

‘Did they bite her?’

He shook his head. ‘Not any more.’

Tolly’s nodules went pink and she started to snivel.

The flyer they found was barely airworthy, but Bev nursed it into the sky with a litany of curses and began a wobbly flight over the treetops. In the co-pilot’s chair, Bernice examined the gun Bev had apparently produced from thin air. It was wide-mouthed and serious-looking.

‘Don’t touch what you don’t understand,’ Bev snarled, and snatched it off her.

‘You are such a bitch.’ The words came from nowhere.

Bev went crimson, like she’d been sunburnt. ‘I’m a bitch? You self-important shit, you’ve got balls to call me that!’

And that was it; battle was joined. ‘What is your malfunction? What have I ever done?’

‘What have you done?’ Bev shouted. ‘You’re so arrogant I’m choking on it! Swanning around like you own the place, pompous and overbearing when you’re not too busy being conceited and smug!’ Bernice said something but Bev was up to full speed now, and ignored it. ‘But, oh, everyone lets jumped-up little Benny have her way, there there, never mind! Everyone loves Benny Summerfield, Miss danger-is-my-name...’ The flyer dipped sharply in an updraft. ‘I’m so sick of you! I don’t know how you make people like you, but you’re toxic waste, woman! You do nothing but make trouble for everyone else!’

Bernice blinked, amazed by Bev’s anger. ‘Ah,’ she said in a small voice, ‘I’m glad we got that out in the open, then.’

Bev made a wordless noise of annoyance and dropped the flyer’s ramp. Through the hatch Bernice saw the kindergarten roof and a mass of wailing schoolkids.

With Doggles trailing at their heels, Hass and Jason led the refugee procession to the doors of the Mansionhouse, crossing the gravel drive in a nervous flock. Braxiatel was there, his expression stony.

‘What do you want? No time for matters of plants or flowers, Hass.’

‘We need shelter.’

A nerve jumped in his face. ‘So, I’m just to let these people in, am I? Let them swamp my home, get underfoot? This isn’t a guesthouse. Take them to the hamlet —’

‘S’gone,’ Jason said, through pain-gritted teeth. ‘Here or nowhere.’

Braxiatel studied the faces of the silent survivors over Hass’s shoulder, and he softened. ‘Well, then,’ he gave a small smile, ‘come in. There’s room for everyone.’

* * *

Their tearful cargo bawled as Bev threw the aircraft back over the writhing clades toward the big house. She saw the undulating sea of serpent-forms closing in on the building. They were only postponing the inevitable.

Bernice did a very mumsy thing and used her handkerchief to wipe dirt from Peter’s snout. He pouted and chewed on something. ‘What are you eating?’ she demanded.

Peter showed her a bit of dead clade; the boy must have killed it in the scramble to board the flyer. He knew he had been naughty. ‘Tried to bite me but it didn’t hurt much.’

She cupped her hand under his chin. ‘Peter Summerfield, take that out of your mouth immediately! You, uh, don’t know where it’s been!’

He did so and stuck out his lower lip. ‘Can I see Daddy now?’

Bernice met Bev’s gaze for an instant and she suddenly felt an irrational sympathy for the woman. ‘Soon, Peter. Very soon.’

They landed hard and it set the kids squealing again. From the drop ramp they bolted out of the flyer and in through the doors Hass held open, a tide of youngsters splitting apart and homing in on their parents. The adults took them up and hugged them, and tried to ignore the rustling approach of the clades over the drive.

Jason took Peter, and Bernice wandered deeper into the house. Every space, every hall was filled to capacity with people, all of them crowding into places that she’d never even realised were there before. In corners where there had been alcoves and galleries, now open doors showed ballrooms and lounges. The same giddiness that she’d felt when she found Brax in his workshop swept over her, the prickling at her sense of scale and dimension. The feeling was old and familiar; it brought back memories of cloister bells and doorways to places larger within than without. Everyone was in here, she realised. Everyone.

In another room, an impossible space the size of an opera house, Doggles gingerly gathered up a dozen carved bricks of cerise Martian granite, the oblate fetishes as old as the Red Planet itself. Hass had explained what the clades were looking for. He couldn't carry them all — there were hundreds of the things here, all labelled and correct — so he picked a handful of the most garish.

The pieces were their only chance for redemption. What better way for him to atone for the disastrous history machine, than to rescue the Collection from its invaders? Doggles balled his stained jacket around the stones and made for the grand doors. He grinned. When they saw him turn the clades away, all of this, every mistake, would be forgotten.

Braxiatel was, unsurprisingly, in his office. He gestured at a tea service where it sat atop the metallic monstrosity from the workshop. 'The pot's still warm. Help yourself.' He was soldering wires to a control box.

'What are you doing?' Bernice said, hands on hips.

'I'm sure I don't know what you mean.'

But the look — the look in his eyes unlocked it for her. Events and random, half-considered thoughts from the past few weeks suddenly snapped into hard, damning focus. 'You've done something to this place, to your ship.'

'Don't jump to conclusions, Bernice. It's so unseemly.'

'Damn it, Brax! In all this confusion, I can't believe I missed it. That's what you meant about defences, about finding a way to protect the Collection?'

Braxiatel made a small 'hmpf' noise and finished with the soldering iron. Her mouth went dry. 'Those things... The clades. They can't get in here.'

He began flipping switches on the device, warming it up. 'Not unless someone does something foolish.'

A nervous laugh escaped Bernice. 'Well, who'd be stupid enough to open the doors with that lot outside?'

Doggles opened the doors to screaming. No one was close enough to stop him doing it. The clades, left to mill around the impenetrable walls of the Mansionhouse and ponder a new strategy, seized on this opportunity with gusto. They poured together, becoming a great seething plug of bodies, and forced inwards toward him.

Fearlessly, Doggles unwrapped the Martian artefacts and offered them up. He had a speech planned and everything. 'Take these,' he intoned. let my friends go —'

The clades tore through him and swallowed the stone totems. Without stopping, they went on through the entrance atrium and into

the galleries. Doggles, what they had left of him, was still screaming. Terror erupted in every room as the serpents streamed up the walls and across ceilings, breaking through every door to find their prize.

Blood hung in the air, the metallic tang of it making Bev's gut knot. The gun in her hand was easy and dangerous, hot flares of photons barking out to crisp the clades as they mounted the central staircase and climbed toward the sick and injured. She blew nanoform flesh into boiling gobbets, emptying charge after charge at the writhing carpet; but there were simply too many of them.

Bev's gun choked out a final, fizzing gasp. She threw it at the clades in rage, and they ate it, pulling it apart to make more of them. Then the serpents phased up through the stairs and walls, and Bev felt their sting.

The screaming again. It rushed up the corridors and swept into the office, it reached a clawed hand into Bernice's gut and twisted.

'Quickly, now,' said Braxiatel. 'Events are moving toward their inevitable end point and we must take steps.' He tapped the machine.

'No!' Bernice shouted. 'This thing —' She aimed a desultory kick at it. 'It's a bomb, Brax! A reality bomb!'

'Quite.' He offered her the control box. Predictably, it had a large red button on its upper surface. 'I imagine you can figure out what this does.'

She was horrified. 'It destroys everything. You can't expect me... Doggles screwed things up enough already with that ridiculous history machine! Now you want to throw fuel on the fire? I won't!'

'It's not a choice, Bernice.'

In the distance she heard what could only have been her son, calling out for her. 'Did you see this coming? Did you know what would happen?'

He gave her the very faintest of smiles as she took the trigger. 'Best for everyone, really,' he noted, 'and I mean absolutely everyone.'

'Yeah,' said Benny, and with one swift movement she punched him hard on the jaw. Braxiatel knocked the tea things flying and collapsed on the rug.

He looked up in time to watch Bernice rip a fist of wires from the innards of the jury-rigged device.

Hass propelled Jason and Peter into the big museum room. There were other people in here, some hiding in corners, some running back and forth.

'Are we safe?' cried a voice.

'No.' Hass felt he could not lie to them

There was a tug on his arm. Jason jerked at his wrist and used his free hand to topple a display case next to the rows of ornate columns.

‘Hass! The stones!’ With difficulty, Jason bent down and scrabbled through the broken glass. He came up with a whorled piece of carved Phobos obsidian. ‘This is what they’re looking for! That idiot Doggles had the right idea! If we just give them all up —’

A scream rose in the survivors’ throats as the clades followed them in, hissing and spitting through the walls.

With one mighty shove, Hass sent Jason and Peter sliding away across the polished marble floor. ‘Keep back,’ he said, somewhat redundantly. Claws open, the gardener shattered every case around him, letting the fragments of his homeworld pool at his feet in drifts of glassy shards.

The clades flocked to him, sense-fronds smelling the taste of Marsdust.

‘Take it!’ Hass boomed. The serpent drones looped and slithered over one another to gorge themselves on the rest of the relics, maws opening wide to swallow them whole; and when they were done, for the first time the clades fell silent. They watched Hass for an expectant moment, and then retreated. The snake-things fell back like a tide drawing out, through the halls and doors, away from the Mansionhouse.

The Martian broke the hush with the orb-shaped device on his belt. It opened with a chime and projected the image of a similar figure, clad in mottled green armour. ‘Brother,’ he said.

‘There are duties that transcend the ties of blood,’ Sset murmured.

‘No,’ Hass growled, and with that word Jason realised he had never actually seen the gardener truly angry before. ‘You betrayed the clan.’

‘Mother taught you well. I will tell her you remained true to your principles.’

‘You have what you want. Take it and go.’

Peter sniffled and held tighter to Jason’s embrace; even the boy sensed the ominous turn the conversation was taking.

Sset’s image wavered. He seemed sad. ‘I shall. But nothing can remain.’

‘There are innocents here.’ Hass pressed. ‘Children.’

Sset’s head bobbed in a nod. ‘I know, brother. I know.’ The hologram guttered out and vanished. Hass let the metal sphere drop from his grip.

Jason’s mouth moved but words didn’t come. He couldn’t be sure if it was just the agony from the clade wound that was misting his vision.

‘I want to see Mummy,’ Peter said, and that helped him find his voice again.

‘Right. I’ll...’ Jason went white with shock when he tried to stand, and sagged back against the lavish columns. ‘My leg...’

Hass extended an arm. 'I will take the boy to her.'

Peter forced a grin and leapt up into Hass's embrace. 'I'm going with the green man,' he told Jason.

'Yes. You are.' He watched them walk away, fixed on Peter's dark eyes, holding on to a brittle smile

Outside in the drive, Bernice balanced on the edge of an ornamental fountain, her gaze fixed on the bowed horizon. She took Peter from Hass and held him so tight the boy made fretting noises.

Bernice drew a shuddering breath and looked up at the Martian. 'I watched them go, the clades. Got what they came for and just buggered off. Dragged what was left of Doggles off with them. Didn't even say thank you.'

Peter pointed at something. 'Look, Mummy. A star. Falling up.' He wrinkled his nose in amusement at the idea.

Hass saw it too. 'From the spaceport,' he reasoned, 'the clade ship is departing.' The words echoed from him. They seemed to be coming from very far away.

'Sset?'

'Yes.'

'Ah.' She tried and failed to keep anything accusatory from her voice. Night came in as the green shimmer of the clade craft described a steep arc into the sky. 'The aid ships were destroyed. Without food —'

Hass silenced her with a gesture. Vivid pinpricks were fanning out of the receding lander, moving to positions equidistant from one another all across the sky. Her blood ran cold at the sight of them. Bernice's throat tightened and suddenly she couldn't form the words to ask him.

'It won't be long,' he told her, 'not long at all. It will be quick.'

An instant of pure, primal flight-reflex engulfed her. There had to be a way to escape! A ship? A transmat? Something! Hass seemed to sense her thoughts and gave her the smallest shake of the head. The awful, fatal understanding hit Bernice in the chest and stilled her breathing. There was nowhere to run to.

'I like the stars,' Peter declared, turning his smile on his mother. The expression started to slip when he saw she was crying. 'Mummy?'

'I like them too,' Bernice told him, filling her vision with the most important thing she had ever achieved, holding him in her gaze even as the dots of light above grew red and menacing. 'And you're the brightest.'

She was smiling at him when the world turned to fire.

Dead Mice

By Joseph Lidster

I know what's happening here. I can see it clearly in front of me. There's a way out of it, I know there is.

And there's a sound.

It's a bit like screaming as the bell continues to chime and a thousand universes and a billion and one choices force their way through him and something... no, everything changes as white light starts to explode around him but he holds it back and he makes it stop. And he buttons his jacket, looks at his reflection and, having taken control once more, he breathes in.

'What now?'

He stands in front of the mirror and smiles.

Perhaps, he ponders, I'm the only one who knows.

He can feel it. The differences. The changes. Each time. All happening at the same time and yet, all... changed. Again and again and again. He's on a Collection where the Axis still rule and he's on a Collection where Jason Kane is dead. At the same moment, he's on a Collection where they're all dead. Dead, except for him. Him, alone. Alone with a knife. Again and again and again and...

And here? What of here? What's different about this one?

He looks at his reflection, staring into his own eyes.

'At least I can rely on you,' he mutters before turning and leaving the room.

His feet make no sound as he slowly walks down the corridor, pausing at each doorway. Pausing. Checking. Checking everything.

Everything looking the same. Perhaps, this is it. Perhaps, this is the right reality. Suddenly, in the darkness behind him, something scratches at the wall. He stops and slowly turns.

Silence.

Again, he starts to walk, heading towards the main entrance door. He needs to see outside. He needs to see the Collection and its people.

The scratching sounds again. Closer.

'Who is that?' he calls, calmly. 'Please show yourself.'

Again, there is no reply. He continues to walk, just slightly increasing the speed of his pace. There, at the end of the gloomy corridor, is the huge wooden door that leads to the outside. Through a crack in the wood, a sliver of sunlight streams, lighting up the particles of dust that dance in the air.

The scratching sounds again. Much closer. Close behind him. Taunting him. 'I'm going to go outside now. If you wish to introduce yourself, I suggest you do it now.' He is still walking when, suddenly, the sharp sliver of sunlight slices into his eyes, blinding him and, for a second, he is helpless as the scratching moves ever closer and closer and he's blind as the scratching comes up behind him and not panicking, never panicking, he raises his hand towards the door and reaches for the handle. The cold, metal ring feels solid and real in his hand. He turns it, hearing the bolt clank as it shudders into place.

The scratching intensifies, getting closer and louder and —

An explosion of heat and light as he forces the door open and he leaves the darkness. And, again, having taken control, he breathes in.

He looks across the grounds. People are walking and chatting and smiling and laughing and everything looks unchanged. He sees Jason, with Peter on his shoulders, being chased by Bernice. He sees Adrian and Bev chatting underneath a tree. He sees people living. He sees life. He sees, well, he can see that everything is clearly fine on this oh-so-fine summer's day.

So, he ponders, what's causing the chill in my hearts?

And, suddenly, the scratching sounds again, right up close behind him and, frozen, not daring to turn, he simply stares as Bernice stops running and chasing and smiling and looks at him.

'Are you coming out to play?' she sings, grinning as she tilts her head to one side.

'I... I hardly think I'm suitably attired,' he replies.

'Not you, Brax!' She laughs. 'Behind you.'

He can't turn. He knows that whatever it is, he can't look at it. It's *wrong*.

Bernice continues to laugh. The sound of her cackling rings across the Collection and Peter and Jason and Adrian and Bev and Hass and Doggles and every single living creature on the Collection, on his Collection, stops and turns and they look and they stare at him. And he knows. He knows, they know.

And that's when he feels it. He feels it crawl, crawling in between his ankles, and he feels it stop. He feels it lying across his feet like a lead weight holding him still and helpless. And they know.

And he looks down as it looks up, staring up at him with its black eyes and it very, very slowly, blinks.

'Wolsey?' he asks as the sudden blackness swallows all light.

In the darkness, something wrapping itself around him. Something warm and clammy, breathing heavily as it squeezes his skin. Then, a single drop of hot liquid falling onto his cold arm and, in yet another explosion of light, his eyes opened.

‘Brax! You’re awake!’ Bernice smiled. A final tear fell from her eye as she let go of his arm.

‘What... what are you doing?’ he asked, regaining his composure. He glanced around and observed that he was in the hospital, that it was the early evening and that there were six other patients being looked after by two doctors and three nurses. He also noticed that the walls needed repainting. She sniffed, not a particularly attractive sight. ‘You’ve been unconscious for three hours. I was, you know, worried. I mean if you go, who pays my wages?’

He slowed his breathing and smiled. ‘My dear Bernice, without wishing to be the ultimate cliché, what happened?’

‘Dunno. Doctor Wt’hlrm’s done tests but he can’t find anything wrong.’

‘There was something wrong. Something wasn’t meant to be here.’

Bernice shrugged again. ‘You’re the expert but we’re starting to think that this is the right one. Everything seems to be back to normal. No eyepatches. No beards of evil. We’re all back.’

He looked up at her. ‘Who’s we?’

‘What?’ She laughed. ‘Are you serious?’

‘Who is we?’

‘Everyone. Well, everyone who was here when it happened.’

‘Mr Doggles?’

She shifted uncomfortably. ‘Yeah, he’s still hanging around. Wish he wasn’t though.’

‘Clarissa Jones?’

Her eyes suddenly stared into his. ‘No,’ she replied. ‘And as tests go, that’s not the most tactful.’

‘Sorry, Bernice.’ He paused, suddenly remembering the feel of the warm, heavy weight holding his feet down and looking up and staring into his eyes with its black eyes and staring and knowing and —

‘What about Wolsey?’ he asked. ‘What about the cat?’

She smiled. ‘Yeah, of course.’

He forced his breathing to slow down and he forced the smile onto his face. He knew that he had to appear calm and rational and safe. Be safe. Breathe in and breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out.

‘Brax?’ She smiled. ‘Are you okay?’

‘I will be. We all will be.’

‘Okay.’ She stood up. ‘I have to go and pick Peter up from school.’

‘Of course. You do that.’ He continued to breathe and smile. ‘I think I’ll return to my office.’

‘Yeah.’ She turned to leave. ‘Oh, wait! Nearly forgot!’

She reached into her jacket, her hand stopping inside. ‘I’ve got something for you,’ she smiled.

She always smiles. Even when she’s hiding something.

‘What’s that?’

She pulled her hand out and gave him a piece of paper. It was crumpled and covered in a strange scrawl.

‘What is it?’ he asked.

She stopped smiling. ‘It’s a present.’

He looked at it again. The colours were all wrong. ‘Oh.’

‘It’s a picture. Peter drew it for you.’ He looked at the crudely crayoned image. A woman. A man. A Killoran. A young boy. A cat.

‘It’s his family! Me, Jason, Adrian, Peter, Wolsey and...’ She moved her finger to the back of the group. To the blue man standing ever so slightly apart from the rest. ‘You!’

He stared at the picture, unable to speak.

‘Brax?’ She was biting her lip. She always did that when she was annoyed. ‘I know you’re not the most emotional bloke but my son drew that for you and you could at least pretend. For me?’

He stared at the red, crayoned cat. Its eyes, black crayon, stared back at him, threatening to engulf him. Again, he felt the different Universes tearing at him, scratching into his hearts. Bernice dead. The Collection run by Killorans. Jason and Bev in love. Bernice alive but not smiling.

‘Brax!’

Her voice snapped him back into reality. Which reality?

‘I’m... I’m sorry. I’m touched. Thank you, Bernice.’ His voice faltered ever so slightly as he spoke. It was enough.

She looked down at him, clearly concerned. ‘Are you sure you’re okay?’

He forced himself to breathe and smile and be calm and be safe and be Brax. ‘Of course! I’ve just been given an original piece of artwork! Unique to the Collection! Please, thank Peter.’

‘Yeah.’ She laughed. ‘You know, I’ll never understand you. But then again, you’re a bloke so why that surprises me, I don’t know. See you later.’

Suddenly she bent down and kissed his cold forehead. Burning lips, imprinting feeling onto his skin and seeping through into the bone. His face remained blank.

‘Yes,’ he replied, steadily. ‘See you later.’

And, wrapped in her usual whirlwind of energy and clumsiness, she left. He looked once more at the unique, should-never-exist picture before carefully folding it and placing it into his pocket. He called out for the doctor.

And, then, he noticed something. He should have guessed it really.

The six patients, two doctors and three nurses were gone. The hospital was empty. He was alone.

‘Doctor Wt’hlml?’ he called.

Silence.

‘Hello?’

Silence. Except, of course, for the scratching.

He pushed back the sheets and sat up.

‘Hello? Wolsey?’ He swung his legs over the side of the bed and dropped his bare feet onto the cold, tiled floor. ‘Wolsey, is that you?’

He stood up.

‘You know you’re not meant to be here, don’t you?’

He took a step forward, his clammy feet sticking slightly to the floor. How could it be so dark so quickly? Scratching suddenly sounded from behind him. Metallic. He swung round and, out of the corner of his eye, glimpsed something running back into the darkness.

He bent down and looked at the bed. Bright silver scratch marks ran down the grey frame. Slowly, he stood up and cleared his throat.

‘Here, pussy, pussy,’ he called, awkwardly trying to mimic the summons he’d heard Bernice use. ‘Come to... come to Braxxy.’

Silence.

‘Oh, this is ridiculous.’ He reached down to grab his shoes.

And felt him.

Felt the warm, soft fur as it brushed against his leg.

He tried not to move.

Purrrrrrrr...

‘Hello, Wolsey.’ He kept his voice quiet and slow and gentle. ‘Have you come out to play?’

For what seemed like hours, neither of them moved. Then, as he oh-so-slowly moved his hand towards the cat’s neck, he felt something cold and wet fall onto his bare toes. He looked down.

A mouse was convulsing as its red and grey insides spread across his toes. It stared up at him with black eyes. And then, with one last pathetic squeak, it died. And, as silently as it had arrived, the cat left. Leaving him alone in the darkness.

Dawn explodes, bathing the Collection in a glorious burst of yellow light as another day begins. Adrian Wall decides not to go in to work. Instead, he and Bev Tarrant spend the day in bed. Bernice Summerfield takes her son to school then makes another start on her book. She visits the library and borrows a number of texts about some long-forgotten war. Outside, she finds herself an available piece of grass, sits down and, dropping the books, immediately falls asleep in the sunshine. Jason Kane starts to paint Peter’s bedroom, stopping occasionally for a sip from a cold can of lager. It’s to be a surprise for the rapidly growing Peter. A more grown-up blue painted over the yellow-stencilled ducks. Within a few hours, he has given up and gone to search for Benny. Elizabeth Monroe laughs as her children draw her

picture in all the wrong colours. Jess Carter carefully considers her list of pros and cons but the only pro she can think of is 'my work' and it's not enough, not enough to change how she feels, so she turns the taps and fills the bath and then searches for a knife. Parasiel is bored. He yawns.

And, alone, in his marbled office, surrounded by his most treasured unmoving possessions, he sits. And he waits. For he knows that the cat will visit him that night. Perhaps it will bring him another present. Perhaps it won't. Either way, he's prepared.

Does anyone else know what's happening, he ponders, as carefully not looking at his own reflection in the ornate mirror, he runs his finger down the silver blade.

* * *

The colours changed, as day became night. The grass changed from green to blue, the water from blue to black. And, as he walked through the gardens and towards the fountain, he changed too, his pale white skin becoming a glowing, moonlit blue. He slowed his step as he approached the fountain. The cat was sitting on the edge of the water, a paw idly playing with something in the water. It stopped, letting a wounded fish escape, and looked up at him. They stared at each other, unblinking, the light of the moon reflecting in their eyes.

Ill-met by moonlight, eh, Mr Brax?' said the cat. It looked at the silver dagger he was carrying. 'I see you've come to kill me.'

He breathed in and remained calm. 'I see you've developed the ability to speak.'

'Oh, I've always been able to,' the cat yawned. 'I just never bothered to do so before. I mean, what's the point?'

'Cats can't talk.'

It lay down and lazily stretched out its legs. 'Well, you know what that must mean then?'

'You imply that I'm going mad?'

It purred. 'You said it.'

He moved closer to the cat and smiled a calm and rational smile. 'No. It's you. You're not meant to be here. You died.'

'In one reality.'

Silently, he moved closer. 'In the real reality.'

'Really?' The cat yawned again.

'Yes.' He stood over it and raised his arm. A silver sliver of light shone in the darkness.

The cat, unblinking, looked up at the dagger. 'I can see, Brax. I know.'

'Know what?'

A burning pain suddenly seared across his wrist as the cat jumped

up on to its hind legs and plunged its claws into his skin. He shouted in pain and dropped the dagger. It splashed into the black water, followed by drops of warm dark blood. He lunged for the creature but it slinked easily past his arm and strolled around the edge of the fountain. Clutching his wrist and his eyes burning with anger, he followed it.

The cat purred. 'I know what you've done. I know what you do.'

It stopped, allowing him to get a little closer, then once more stared into his eyes. 'I know what you are, Irving Braxiatel.'

He felt the chill in his hearts again. What if they found out? What if they knew his secrets? What would happen to his Collection?

Another voice called from the darkness. 'And what are you, Mr Braxiatel?'

He forced himself not to react. In the tiniest fraction of a second, he hid his bleeding wrist behind his back, straightened his tie, forced a smile and called out. 'Mr Doggles? Admiring the Collection by moonlight, are we?'

Doggles stepped into the light. 'Oh, yes. It's a pretty fantastic place you've got here.' He glanced over at the cat. It looked at him, tilted its head to one side and smiled.

'I'm glad you think so. Are you lost?'

Doggles shrugged. 'No.'

'Only, it is quite late.'

'No. I was just out for a stroll when I heard voices. Is everything all right? Who were you talking to?'

He continued to smile. Behind Doggles, he could see the cat walking towards them. He looked at Doggles and then back at the cat. And he realised.

'They're not just different realities. History has changed.'

The cat stuck its tongue out. 'Give the man a badge.'

'You two can't be here. Not at the same time. You died, Wolsey.' He smiled. 'You died before Doggles arrived.'

And he realised why he felt so cold. History was being changed, which meant that everything he had, everything he owned... it was no longer worth anything.

His Collection, his life, was worthless.

Doggles slowly turned around and looked at the cat. 'Hello, little fellow.' He began to tickle it under its chin. 'Are you meant to be dead then?'

The cat stopped walking and, staring up at them, slowly blinked. 'It's true. Then again, perhaps this time we could be Dog-less. That's got to be better than catless.'

Ignoring Doggles's stunned reaction, Braxiatel laughed. 'That's terrible. If that's the best you could come up with then it's a good

thing you didn't talk before.'

Standing in between them, Doggles tried to speak. 'But... how can it... how can a cat talk?'

The cat ignored him. 'We could do it, though. He overheard us talking.' Again, it blinked. 'He knows what you are. He knows what I am.'

'But what about the history machine?'

The cat purred. 'We'll say I invented it.'

He laughed. 'You don't even have opposable thumbs!'

'Miaow,' said the cat, looking offended. 'There's no need to be bitchy.'

Doggles looked completely horrified. 'What's going on?'

The cat spoke. 'Listen to me, Brax. I know who you care about. I know who you think is important. Who do you think she would want alive? Her beloved cat or a man who, in one history, is an ill-advised lover?'

She shifted uncomfortably. 'Yeah, he's still hanging around. Wish he wasn't though.'

He took a careful step towards Doggles who lurched back, suddenly trapped against the base of the fountain. He wrapped his hands around the Cahlian's neck and began to squeeze. He focused all his energy into his hands, ignoring the flailing arms that were punching at his sides and ignoring the strangulated gasps as Doggles tried to beg for his life. He forced his thumbs harder into the other man's neck, tightening his grip. He could feel his victim getting weaker as his hands tightened and, in a sudden explosion of energy, he lifted the Cahlian into the air and, bouncing his head off the stone fountain, plunged him into the water. He tightened his grip further as, finally, Doggles ceased to exist. For the briefest of moments, everything seemed to stop, the different histories starting to resolve into one. Then, the cat purred.

'I think you can let go,' it said. 'He's sleeping with the fishes now.'

He let go and, laughing hysterically, looked at the cat. 'Is that it then? Is history safe? Am I safe?'

The cat jumped off the fountain and walked towards him. He stopped laughing and shuddered as it slinked through his legs, its tail lightly hitting his shin. 'Safe?' said the cat. 'You've just strangled and drowned somebody. Not to mention smashing his skull in.'

'You told me to!'

The cat laughed. 'Yeah, that'll stand up in court. I'm afraid, Mr Braxiatel, you're going to need a patsy. I'd love to help but Bernice will be looking for me. Ciao!' And the cat disappeared into the darkness once more.

And he felt the rising panic as everything changed and he lost control and...

‘No!’ He forced the panic down, strangled it, made it go away. He buttoned up his jacket and looked at Doggles’s body. The red and grey insides of the Cahlian’s head were starting to spread into the water. Disappearing into the blackness.

Dawn explodes, bathing the Collection in a glorious burst of yellow light as another day begins. Bernice Summerfield takes her son to school then, having given up on the book, starts to prepare a lecture for the following day. Jason Kane, again, starts to paint over the yellow ducks. Within a few hours, he has given up and gone to distract Benny. Elizabeth Monroe is concerned as her children draw disturbing pictures of their families, the eyes bleeding red crayon. She tells the children that there will be no more drawing and that they’ll read instead. Doctor Wt’hlrm is unable to save Jess Carter, who has simply lost too much blood. Mr Hass makes a shocking discovery when he finds the partially naked body of Bev Tarrant in the fountain. Adrian Wall reveals that the previous night he had discovered that Bev was cheating on him and that he’d followed her as she’d gone to meet her other lover. Dried blood in his claws confirms his confession. Then, clutching his head in agony, the Killoran collapses into a coma.

And, alone, in his marbled office, surrounded by his most treasured possessions, he sits. And he waits. For he knows that the cat will visit him that night. It will visit him and it will taunt him. He hears that Bev’s body has been found. He knows that this is wrong. History has changed again. He had to do it, though. He had to try to protect the Collection. This Collection and all the Collections in all the realities. They all need protecting. He won’t let what happened before happen again. So he sits and he waits and when a devastated Bernice arrives he says the right words, at the same time noticing that his bookshelves need dusting and pondering on who the new construction manager should be.

‘Wolsey can talk!’

He blinked. ‘What?’

He looked over at the open door. Peter was there, holding the cat. ‘Oh, sorry Peter, I was miles away. How long have you been stood there?’

‘Six and a half minutes. Wolsey can talk!’

He looked at the cat as it oh-so-innocently rubbed its face against Peter’s.

‘Peter,’ he said, standing up. ‘Put the cat down.’

‘Why?’

He kept his voice calm. 'Because I said so.'

'You're not my dad.'

'No,' he replied. 'But I am a very important person so you should do what I say.'

Suddenly, the cat lunged and scratched at Peter's face. The child dropped the hissing cat and squealed.

'Mr Brax! He scratched me!'

He ran over to the child and examined his face. 'It's all right, Peter. It's just a small scratch.'

'Why did he do it? I'm his friend. You don't hurt your friends!'

He flinched and stood up. 'No, that's right. You don't hurt your friends. Now, shouldn't you be going home? It's late.'

The child took another step into the office. 'I've never been in here before. Is this where you work?'

'Yes.'

The child looked up at him. 'My daddy used to build things. That was his work. He's asleep now. Mummy says he might not wake up.'

He turned away from the child and walked back towards his desk. 'Perhaps... perhaps he was tired.'

The child followed him. 'I think he might be dead. Like Wolsey.'

'What?' He turned, crouched down and grabbed the child. 'What did you say?'

'Like Wolsey. Wolsey was dead. He's not now.'

He gripped the child's shoulders. 'You know! You know he shouldn't be here!'

The child looked as if he would cry. 'You're hurting me.'

He gripped the child tighter and shouted. 'How do you know? Tell me!'

'Brax! What the hell are you doing?'

He let go of the child and looked, once more, at the open doorway.

'Jason, I didn't see you there.' He stood up as the idiot walked into the room.

'Obviously! Brax, what's going on? Adrian? Bev? And now... what were you doing to Peter?'

'Nothing!' He turned away from the idiot and went to sit at his desk. 'Nothing. He came in here, chasing the cat and I was just telling him he should go home as you'd be worried.'

The idiot relaxed as he took the child's hand. 'Oh. Okay, then. What is going on though?'

'Nothing. People. Everything.'

'Brax? Are you okay?'

Before he could answer, the cat shot out from underneath the desk and ran towards the open doorway. The child let go of the idiot's hand and chased after it.

For a second, they paused and stood in the light of the open doorway. Then, with one or both of them laughing, they disappeared.

The idiot shrugged. 'If only we could all do that, eh?'

'Do what?'

'Run away. You know, block it all out and just... you know.'

'No.'

The idiot turned to leave. 'Of course, Adrian's doing that now. I guess a coma's a pretty good way of blocking it...'

And then the idiot turned back to face him.

'The coma. It's a bit like what... well, what happened to me. You know, the headaches?'

They stared at each other.

'Well, I suppose so. I can't quite see what the connection would be.'

'The connection?' The idiot's voice was quiet. 'We both live here. We've both been in love with Benny. We're both Peter's father. We both... know you.'

Breathe in. Breathe out. Stay calm and focused.

'And?'

'Well, what if someone... what if someone's doing something to us. What if Adrian didn't kill Bev?'

Blank face. Breathing. Calm. Safe.

'Did you have anyone in mind?'

The idiot looked confused. 'I'm not sure. It's like I know something but I can't remember what it is.'

A noise sounded from the doorway. There, silhouetted in the light, sat the cat.

Perfectly still, its eyes glowed as it stared at him.

And he knew what he had to do.

He stood up and walked over to a whisky decanter. 'Perhaps a drink would help?'

The idiot looked surprised. 'Oh? Well, I guess. I don't want to leave Benny for too long, though. She's in a right state.'

He poured out two glasses of whisky as the idiot babbled about unimportant things. He turned and looked at the cat.

'He knows,' it whispered, unmoving in the light. Then, silently, another figure joined it. A man.

'Doggles,' he gasped. 'I killed you.'

The idiot turned. 'What?'

'Not you! Not yet!' The idiot stared. 'Brax? What's going on?'

Doggles stepped into the room. His head covered in bandages, he spoke. 'He tried to kill me, Jason. Wolsey saved me.'

The idiot laughed. He always laughed, even when he was terrified. 'What?'

'It's true.' Doggles stepped back into the darkness. 'He's mad, Jason.'

Get away from here. Take Benny and Peter and get away from here.'

And the man who he thought he'd killed was gone. And the cat that should have been dead quietly licked one of its paws.

'Hmm,' it purred. 'Bev's blood. My little present for Bernice.'

The idiot screamed. 'Brax! What the hell is going on?'

He knew. He already knew what he had to do. So, as the idiot screamed and as the cat watched, he picked up the nearest heavy object. A small statue. A pawn. Purple. He couldn't even remember where it was from.

And he raised the statue into the air. A sliver of purple, bright in the darkness. And he smashed it down onto and into the idiot's noisy face.

And there was blood and noise and mess as bits of red and grey insides fell onto his feet.

'A present for you,' purred the cat.

And then he realised what he'd done. He realised what he had done to her. 'She'll know,' he whispered. 'She'll know it was me.'

The cat sat perfectly still. 'I know. I know it was you and perhaps I'll tell her.' It stood up and began to walk away.

Evening becomes night as darkness descends onto the Collection. Tonight, there are no parties. Nobody is celebrating life. Not tonight. Bernice Summerfield is in her living room with her son. She wonders where Jason is. She doesn't want to be alone. Not after what's happened. She hugs Peter and she hugs Wolsey. The light is on but she can feel the darkness outside as it threatens to engulf her home. Then, she hears the door open.

'Jason? Is that you?'

He walked into the room. There she was. She looked scared. She was smiling but he knew that was just for her son. She always smiled.

'It's me.'

'Brax? Are you all right?'

He looked at the cat as it licked the child's hand. And he knew what he had to do.

'I'm doing this for you, Bernice,' he said. 'I'm doing this for you and for the Collection.'

And he walked over and he pulled the cat away from the child. He dragged it across the floor. The cat lay still, looking up at him. Slowly, it blinked.

'Brax? What are you doing?' she asked, pulling the child towards her.

He paused and looked at her. 'Look away.'

'Why?'

The child spoke. 'It's okay, mummy. Mr Brax just wants to make everything okay. He told me he doesn't hurt his friends.'

She looked stunned. 'What?'

He looked down at the cat. It lay still, a quiet purr emanating from its throat.

And for a brief second he sees himself as the blue crayon man standing over the red crayon cat. He can see the crayoned family. Bernice, Peter, Jason, Adrian, Bev and him. Irving Braxiatel. He raises his foot above the cat's head.

He can see the yellow crayon Sun and the crayon 'M's flying over the scribbled blue sky. Everyone's happy, aren't they? Here on his crayoned Collection.

The cat looks up at him and speaks. 'She'll remember this. Deep down. Deep, deep down, she'll remember. This is my present to her. I love her and now I know she'll always know what you are.'

It stops talking as, carefully and without emotion, Irving Braxiatel slams his foot down. He must make this stand. It stops. Now.

A sliver of crayoned red splatters across his shoe.

There's a noise. It's a bit like screaming.

Acts of Senseless Devotion

By Pete Kempshall

Everyone stopped at the small grave. The name on the headstone meant nothing to the majority of the people passing through the memorial garden, yet Hass had noticed that the child-sized mound of earth was rapidly becoming a focus for the mourners' sorrow. The silent plot spoke directly to each of them, hinting at decades of unfulfilled promise mouldering beneath the soil, boxed up and abandoned like toys outgrown by their owner. And when at last they had heard enough, the grieving crowds would move on, burdened by sadness far heavier than any laid on them by the garden's other tombstones.

Hass wondered whether the lamenting crowds would grieve more had they actually known the deceased, or understood the circumstances of his death. As he had helped lower the boy's body into its last resting place, Hass's own feelings had been mixed: sad, yes, but also proud. Uplifted, even.

Bernice, of course, felt no such conflict. Today was her first visit to the graveside since they had put up the stone — she had been kneeling there almost an hour now, mouthing words Hass could not hear. The accepted story was that her injuries had been too severe for her to attend the funeral, although Hass himself had his doubts. The professor had lost so much in the explosion, she was still carrying such guilt... The Martian surmised that if any trauma had been responsible for keeping her away it had not been physical.

At last she turned her face to him, speaking out loud for the first time since she had arrived.

'I could have saved him.'

Shuffling forward, Hass rested his heavy claw on her shoulder, steadying her body as the sobs tore through her.

Benny jolted awake, seized by icy panic. A second or two passed before reason reasserted itself: this was hardly the first time that she had experienced complete dread at waking up in a strange place. At least she was in a relatively comfortable bed this time, not a gutter. Or a cell.

The room was dark, its features merely shades of deep grey and black. Benny considered the evidence: the blip-blip-blip of an electronic monitor off to the side of the bed; the shards of bright pain that jabbed into her whenever she attempted movement more ambitious than... well, breathing. Oh, and there was her last memory,

of being blown sky high by some pillock trying to tune in a glorified TV set. And the sky on fire and...

Well, you didn't have to be Sherlock Holmes to figure it out, did you?

She tried to sit up, but her stiff, fresh, hospital sheets had been tucked in so tightly that she was immobile from the chest down. By the time she had extricated herself, she was panting in agony. Second thing on her 'to do' list: get painkillers.

First thing: find Peter. Wincing, she swung her legs over the side of the bed, thoughts of how close Peter had been to the explosion spurring her on through the pain. She reached around to the wall behind her for a light switch. No luck. Logically, there should be one next to the door. If she could find the door, though, she could leave to find Peter, and then she wouldn't need the lights on in the room. Typical.

The coolness of the tiles seeped up through the soles of her bare feet as she gingerly reintroduced them to the floor. Having at last screwed up the courage to put her weight on them (aaaaaarggggh!), Benny staggered into the gloom, arms outstretched to defend against ambush from the room's bolder pieces of furniture.

She was no more than three paces from the bed when she walked face-first into a metal pole, a drip-stand too slim to discern in the darkness. Startled, she twisted away, only to bounce off a metallic trolley that some idiot had placed beside the pole at waist level. Benny hit the ground like a felled tree, amidst a shower of clattering objects dislodged from the — aptly named — crash cart.

Agony speared through her. 'Buggerbuggerbuggerbuggerbugger!' she howled. There came the urgent slap of running feet from outside, and hands slipped under her arms, grasped her writhing body and lifted her gently but firmly back to the bed.

'Professor Summerfield? Can you hear me, Bernice?'

Benny recognised the voice, electronically synthesised yet filled with concern. She'd first met Dr Wt'hlm nine months before, after that unfortunate incident with the Mirovnian gin and the fried egg sandwich. At the time she'd been deeply suspicious of being treated by an entity composed of pure thought — how good could someone be at looking after your body when they didn't even have one of their own? It hadn't taken her long, however, to realise Wt'hlm — his medical endeavours facilitated by a humanoid medibot through which he spoke and acted — was perhaps the best doctor on the Collection. She'd long since ceased to think of him and the droid as separate entities.

'You shouldn't be out of bed, you know,' Wt'hlm continued.

'I'm fine,' said Benny. 'I wouldn't be bumping into things at all if it

wasn't so damn dark in here — are you trying to save on your energy bills or something?’

‘Perhaps you'd better lie down, Professor.’

‘I don't need to lie down. I said I'm fine!’ said Benny, her patience deserting her. ‘I just want to get out of this room and find my son, which would be a damn sight easier if you'd stop fussing and turn the bloody lights on!’

‘Bernice,’ he said gently. ‘The lights *are* on.’

‘I see. Well, I don't, but you know what I mean.’ That's it, Benny told herself, laugh it up. Paper over the cracks with brilliant comedy and maybe Wt'hlm won't see that all you really want to do is smash everything you can lay your hands on and scream until your lungs bleed.

Of course he can see, you idiot. You're the one who's blind, not him. ‘The good news is that you still have some degree of light perception,’ Wt'hlm said. ‘We'd assumed from your scans that you'd be left with no sight at all. Can you see this?’

Benny tracked the pale grey object with her eyes. ‘You're waving your hand in front of me.’

‘Excellent. Now how many fingers am I holding up?’

‘I... I can see your hand, but... I can't...’

‘It's all right, loss of detail's only to be expected. We can improve on that, given time.’ Wt'hlm rose from his seat. ‘I've already created a treatment programme for you, we'll start right away.’

‘Cut to the chase, Doc. Will I see again?’

Wt'hlm exhaled, long and low. ‘In the short term, no, you'll have no better vision than you have now. In the long term your best bet's probably replacements.’

‘Transplants, then?’ She tried to sound cheery about it. Eight out of ten for effort, Benny.

‘Implants. Robotic eyes. When Mr Doggles's machine was destroyed, it released some form of radiation, one that's proven to be entirely new to us. Your optic nerves weren't just seared, they were aged. There's simply nothing more we can do with them. Implants will bypass the damaged nerves completely and transmit information directly into your brain. But it'll mean complex surgery, and you'll need a whole new frame of reference. You'll have to learn to see again. It won't be what you're used to, but it will be sight. All things considered, you've been very lucky, Professor.’

‘Lucky?’ Benny spat. ‘How is this lucky? You're going to have to help me, Doc, because I can't see a bright side here.’

The foot of the bed sagged as Wt'hlm sat down on it. ‘Eighty-seven people were hurt in the explosion, Professor, most of them more

seriously than you. If we'd been able to give you tissue regeneration early enough we might — might — have been able to save your eyes. But we had to prioritise, allocate the regenerators to those who needed them most. Even then we couldn't handle all the casualties, we were too much in the dark about this new radiation.' He sighed. 'We lost 34 people.'

Benny felt her body temperature drop several degrees. Learning that she was blind had overwhelmed her, consumed her so utterly that she'd completely forgotten about...

'Peter.'

'We tried everything.' Wt'hlm intoned sombrely. 'I'm sorry, Bernice.'

Jason's heart had seized when he arrived at Benny's room to find the bed neatly made and empty.

His mind raced to all the wrong conclusions as he grabbed a passing nurse and shook Benny's new whereabouts from her. Professor Summerfield had merely gone up the hall to Intensive Care, to sit with another patient. Flashing one of his best and sexiest grins by way of an apology, Jason had left the nurse and wandered slowly to the ICU to find Benny, hoping the embarrassed flush would fade from his cheeks before she had a chance to spot it.

With a stab of guilt, it occurred to him that that wouldn't be a problem.

He'd come straight from Dr Wt'hlm's office, where they'd been discussing Benny's condition. The physical prognosis had been positive — Jason had resisted the urge to share with the doctor the wholly inappropriate feeling he'd had that robot eyes were quite cool — but Bernice's mental outlook remained cause for concern.

Jason had been worried enough when he'd seen how hard Wolsey's death had hit her. This was on another level entirely. The next few days would be crucial: how Benny reacted to her condition would determine whether she approached her disability as a handicap or a challenge. Jason would have put money on her treating it as a challenge, had Peter not been so gravely ill.

The doctors were at a total loss. The radiation from the explosion had affected Peter in ways that confounded all attempts at treatment. Wt'hlm had put it down to Peter's unusual Human/Killoran genes — the staff just weren't familiar enough with the mixed DNA to arrest the massive cellular degradation. The boy was just wasting away. At best, Peter had two days to live, at worst, less than 24 hours.

Once, Bernice would have hopped straight on a shuttle and torn the galaxy apart looking for a cure for her son. Now all she could do was sit by, helpless, while he died. According to Dr Wt'hlm, the feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy caused by such impotence would lead

Benny in one of two directions: profound depression or simple, unshakeable denial. He'd warned Jason that the seriously wounded could impose on themselves a terrible isolation, refusing help to prove they could cope alone.

Either way, the woman Jason loved would be lost to him.

Striding through the door and up to Peter's bed, Jason dropped into the seat next to Benny. Act normal. Be confident. Build her up.

'Thought you might need some company!'

'You thought wrong.'

'You don't have to face this alone, you know,' he said, placing a hand on Benny's shoulder. She shrugged it off.

'Unless you're planning on going blind too, that's exactly what I have to do.' Jason bit his tongue. A different tack, perhaps. 'I spoke to Dr Wt'hlrm about your injuries. He says there's a good chance you'll be able to see again with implants.'

'In two to three years, if the operation goes well, and there's no guarantee it will. So don't patronise me, Jason — you've no idea what you're on about.'

'I just want you to know that if you need anything, you can rely on me.'

'Rely on you?' Benny laughed bitterly. 'When have I ever really been able to do that, Jason? Shit, you weren't even any bloody use to me when Wolsey died. You can't help, Jason. You're incapable.'

Jason reeled. 'Now, Benny...'

'Are you still here?'

Jason got to his feet. Slipping though the door, he paused, knowing what he should say, but unable to force his numbed brain to form the three simple words. Then, without another sound, he was gone.

The first night after Peter's birth, on the flight back from Deirbhile, Benny hadn't been able to sleep. It wasn't that he'd kept her up with his crying — actually she'd been surprised at how peaceful he was. It was that she couldn't stop herself from looking in on him, from checking that he was all right, that he hadn't stopped breathing.

Standing in the dark, she'd listened to his soft breaths until satisfied that all was normal, then she'd slipped quietly away for fear of waking him.

Half an hour later she had been back beside his cot again.

The sound of Peter's breathing was reaching to Benny through the shadows again now, not the gentle baby-breaths but the rhythmic hiss-clunk of his respirator. Sitting next to her son's bed in intensive care, Bernice tried not to think about how every lungful he took was carrying him further away from her.

She had felt wretched for hours. In the back of her mind there were

always the memories of how she'd initially neglected Peter, been too focused on her own problems to pay him the attention he deserved. No matter which way she turned it, she was the poster girl for bad mothers. Ms Jones had been right.

Benny's idea had changed that.

She hadn't wanted to be so hard on Jason. It must have been breaking his heart, but once Benny realised what had to be done she'd known to push him away.

Reaching across to the bed, Benny took Peter's hand and squeezed it. This time she wasn't going to let him down.

'You're calling it off, aren't you? All that time you spent summoning up the courage to finally make a commitment and now you're leaving me.'

Bev glared at Adrian across the workshop. The massive Killoran stared at the ground, unable to meet her gaze. Bev wasn't sure it was possible for a seven-foottall man-dog to look sheepish, but he was certainly making a decent fist of it.

'I have no choice,' he murmured. 'It would not be fair to continue in a relationship with you when it is my duty to be with my family. They need me.'

Bev flung her arms in the air in frustration. 'No, Adrian, just say it. Bernice needs you. You've never got over her and now that she's crippled you've got the perfect excuse to waltz in and take care of her.'

'It's not just Bernice. My son...'

'Your son's as good as dead, Adrian!' Bev rubbed a hand across her forehead, guilt smothering her anger. 'Oh, shit, I'm sorry. Of course you have to go to them, I understand. It's just that she's done it again, hasn't she? She's got between us.'

Adrian stood, impassive, and watched as Bev turned and walked slowly away, the fight knocked out of her. 'Where are you going?' he rumbled. 'To pack. I'm obviously not needed here. If you want to say goodbye, I'll be on the next shuttle off the Collection. If not... well, good luck with Bernice.'

The case ricocheted off the bed, smacked loudly into the wall and tumbled down on to the floor. Unfazed, Bev hurled a second piece of luggage down in its place and started to stuff clothes inside. She'd be well rid of this damn place. If she'd had any sense she'd have left after the Occupation. But then Braxiatel had offered her a job and suddenly — finally — she'd felt there was somewhere she could belong, somewhere she could stay instead of roaming the universe like some pathetic nomad. Physically or mentally, everyone else here had been scarred, had been desperate to start life anew. She'd thought she could

fit in.

Who was she trying to kid? She didn't belong here. Ultimately Bev Tarrant didn't really belong anywhere.

She'd tried so hard over the past few months to be accepted into Braxiatel's exclusive little club. She'd pored over the dullest texts imaginable, hoping to learn something about archaeology that could help with her new role. But no amount of book learning could persuade the Collection's academics to treat her with respect. Meanwhile Bernice flaming Summerfield fumbled her way through lectures, spent ninety per cent of her time caught up in stupid schemes and antics and they loved her. Bev flung a heavy work boot at the suitcase. It bounced clear to join the growing pile of clutter on the floor.

When the Axis had invaded, Bev had stepped up to lead the resistance without a second thought, pledging herself to the defence of an institution which at the time had no real place for her. And while she'd fought, while she'd been tortured by the bastards oppressing her friends, Bernice had dithered, her refusal to commit even leading to her being branded as a collaborator.

So why was Bernice the one showered with glory, the one who got the papers written about her, while all Bev was left with was a face full of scars? And now this.

Bev slammed down the lid of the case, forcing it against the chaotic contents in a vain attempt to fasten the catches. The lid popped back up, and she seized the whole bag, screaming as she flung it across the room. She continued to roar out her frustration, kicking the case around the floor until finally, red-faced and vented, she collapsed to the bed.

If she ever saw Bernice Summerfield again it'd be millennia too soon.

The soft beeping of her wall-comm made her heart leap. Adrian? Perhaps he'd come to his senses. Keying the unit to voice only — she couldn't have him seeing her like this — Bev answered.

'Bev? It's Bernice. Look I know you're probably busy, but I need your help. Bev? Bev?'

Oh, perfect.

Adrian had expected to find Braxiatel in his usual spot behind the large mahogany desk, so was wrong-footed to discover that the chair behind the polished wooden surface was empty. The porter in the hall outside had told Adrian that Braxiatel hadn't left his study for hours. The only evidence that anyone had been in the room at all, however, was a cup of tea perched dangerously close to the desk's edge. Adrian noted that the beverage had been so long neglected that a thin, brown

skin had formed on the liquid.

It took a second for Adrian to realise that actually Braxiatel was in the room: he was standing so still that Adrian's eyes had simply skated over him. The thin man had positioned himself in front of his mantelpiece, over which hung a large, ornate mirror into which he stared. So enraptured was he that he had failed even to notice that Adrian had entered the room.

Puzzled by his employer's uncharacteristic vanity, Adrian edged towards the mantelpiece. He placed himself behind Braxiatel so that they were both reflected in the mirror — perhaps that would catch his attention. Yet even the sudden presence of the hulking builder at his shoulder wasn't cause enough for Braxiatel's gaze to waver. Instead his eyes continued to bore into their own image, as if the man were lost in himself. But what Adrian saw in Braxiatel's face was not narcissism. More like pain.

'I... I'm sorry to disturb you,' Adrian growled softly. 'I was hoping we could talk.' Braxiatel's expression remained immobile, giving no sign whatsoever that he had heard. 'I wanted to ask about Peter... I was wondering if you knew of anything... If there was something you could do to...'

'No.' Braxiatel's mouth formed the word so subtly that, for a second, Adrian had thought someone else must have spoken it. 'There's nothing.'

'But there must be a way to save him,' Adrian said. 'There must be something in the Collection that can...'

Braxiatel turned from the looking glass, redirecting his stare at the Killoran. 'Some things are meant to be, Adrian. There can be no changing them. I'm sorry.'

He held Adrian's gaze for the merest of moments then fluidly reoriented himself in front of the mirror and lapsed back to his contemplation. It was as if he had never moved.

Adrian watched him for another minute before padding to the door. He knew Braxiatel felt a responsibility for the lives of everyone on the Collection, but hadn't expected him to react so badly to the tragedy as to withdraw entirely.

For all the emotional damage Braxiatel appeared to be suffering, Adrian still trusted him implicitly. If he had known of anything that could be done for Peter if he had even suspected an answer was out there — he would have told Adrian.

But if Irving Braxiatel had no way to save Peter, surely there could be none.

Fighting the moist prickling that was building in his eyes, Adrian closed the study door behind him, its soft click snipping any remaining threads of hope to which he still clung.

Bev wasn't completely sure why she'd agreed to meet Bernice. At the very least, as she had switched off the wall-comm and the heat of her anger had cooled, she'd recognised she was being selfish by begrudging Adrian the chance to be with his son. Even admitting that, however, Bev still felt seething resentment towards Bernice. But how could she say no when the price for her refusal would be the life of an innocent child?

There would, of course, be some reward for Bev: it would raise her stock with Adrian considerably if she prevented his son's death. If she was honest with herself, however, there was something else that sold Bev on pitching in. Here, at last, was something that Bernice Summerfield couldn't do and Bev Tarrant could.

That fact in itself begged a question, one that gnawed at Bev the whole way through the Mansionhouse to the Collection's medical wing. By the time she arrived at Bernice's room, it was as much as Bev could do to swap greetings with the blind woman before the query forced itself out.

'Why ask me? Why not Jason or Adrian?'

Bernice sat in her bed, eyes fixed on Bev, unnerving her with their blank gaze. 'If they knew what I had in mind they'd try to stop me.'

'What do you have in mind?'

'I need you to find a man for me,' Benny started. Not enough to just take mine, Bev mused. 'It won't be hard — I know exactly where he is but I can't get there myself. I'm pretty sure he has something that'll save Peter, I just need you to get it and bring it back. I'll do the rest.'

Bev sat back in her chair. 'Go on.'

Ten minutes later, when Bernice had finished talking, Bev puffed out her cheeks and looked at her, wide-eyed. 'Well, I can see why you wouldn't ask Adrian or Jason.' She got to her feet. 'I'll do it.'

'Thank you, Bev. There really was no one else I could ask.'

Setting off on her mission, Bev knew Bernice was right. No one else would help her. They all cared for her too much.

The soft click of the door opening roused Benny from her doze.

'It's all right, I'm awake, no need to pussyfoot around. Did you get it?'

'Eventually,' Bev replied. 'To start with, that guy you put me on to denied even having it.'

'Did you say it was to save Peter?'

'As soon as I did he couldn't hand it over fast enough.'

Benny smiled weakly. 'Well, he's got a vested interest. Do you have it there?'

Bev's shadow slid to the left, moving from the dim rectangle of the open door to be lost in the blackness to its side. A high, eerie note

broke the silence, like glass flicked by a fingernail. 'It's on the table by the door. There's nothing else on there, so you should find it easily enough.'

'Don't want to get too close to me with it, then?'

'After you told me what it does? Not a chance,' Bev laughed. 'Not that I don't trust you or anything, but what's to stop you using it right now? I mean, it could give you your sight back, couldn't it?'

'True. But using it now wouldn't help Peter.'

'Right.' Bev's silhouette appeared again in front of the door. 'Good luck with it, then.'

'Not staying to see how things go?'

'I'm booked on a shuttle off the Collection. Leaves in ten.'

'So I hear,' Benny said. 'Listen, Bev, you don't need to leave, you know. As soon as Adrian hears what you've done for Peter he'll want to thank you.'

'I don't think so. Adrian and I were done a long time ago.' Bernice couldn't see it, but something in the tone of Bev's voice suggested she was smiling. 'Goodbye, Bernice.'

'Bev, wait!' Benny sat upright, her aching limbs protesting at the abrupt motion. 'I never got the chance to tell you... about the Occupation... I'm sorry. I'm sorry I couldn't stop Jason doing what he did to your face. If I'd come over to the Resistance sooner...'

Bev raised her fingers to her scars, touched them hesitantly. 'Don't, Bernice. There's no need.' A sighing of fabric whispered to Benny as Bev drew nearer. Arms slipped around her shoulders, hugging tightly. 'Worry about your son, not me.'

Gently Bev disentangled herself, and she was gone.

Benny allowed only a few seconds to pass before reaching across to the comm unit beside her bed, and activating the viewscreen.

Light and colour swirled before Jason's eyes, the result of the vigorous rubbing he'd administered while the data pad powered down. Thirteen straight hours sifting documents in the Collection archives, both electronic and hard copy, had left him thinking that if he stared at any more print he'd go blind.

Shit. You see that was exactly the kind of thing Benny meant. It didn't matter how well-intentioned he was, Jason's tact bypass was always going to stop him getting back into her good books.

Was it possible for him to feel any more useless?

Actually, yes. All that effort and he still hadn't the first clue how to save Peter. The answer had to be in all this clutter somewhere — what's the point of having the most comprehensive collection of the weird and wonderful known to man if it couldn't give you a hand with something like this? He was damned if he could see it, though.

Deciding a break was in order he grabbed his coat and started walking.

He hadn't intended to go to the medical wing, his feet made the decision unilaterally. He only snapped back to reality when Bev barrelled into him, half-running away from the recovery rooms. She pushed hurriedly past him, barely breaking her stride.

Oh, no, no, no. It was bad enough Benny treating Jason like he wasn't there, he wasn't about to let other people start. 'Bev, wait!' He grabbed her arm, her momentum pivoting her back towards him. He hadn't been expecting hugs and kisses, but the snarl on Bev's face raised the hairs on his neck. She looked like she was about to belt him. 'Is something wrong?' The fierceness of Bev's aspect vanished so quickly that Jason questioned whether he'd even seen it at all. 'No, no... Benny just wanted my help with something. I'm sorry... Look, I'm sorry, I can't stop. Got a shuttle to catch!'

Disengaging herself from Jason's grip, she disappeared up the corridor. Something smouldered in Jason's chest, not so much the result of Bev's off-hand dismissal, more what she'd revealed in her few words to him. The rage inside him burst into flames.

Despite a brief twinge of guilt, he was gratified to see Benny jump when he crashed through the door to her room. 'What the hell are you playing at, Bernice?'

'I don't know what...'

'You know damn well "what"! I practically beg you to let me help with Peter and you tell me to sod off. Then I find out you've been sending Bev bloody Tarrant out to run errands for you.'

'Oh. That.'

'Yes, that! You don't even like the woman and you'll trust her over me?'

'It's not like that, Jason, I...'

'I don't want to hear it! I don't know why you pushed me away, Bernice, but you'll be happy to hear it worked. You're on your own.' Jason spun on his heel, ready to stomp out, only to find his irresistible force blocked by the living, breathing definition of the unmoveable object.

'I'm sorry,' Adrian growled. 'I didn't mean to interrupt. I just came to see if Benny needed any help.'

'Let me answer that one for you, Benny,' Jason fumed. 'Yes, she does need help, but no, not from you. She already has someone to run around after her, don't you, dear?'

Adrian fidgeted, embarrassed. 'I can see this isn't a good time. I'll come back later.'

'You do that,' Jason snapped, turning back to his ex-wife. 'But I'm pretty sure Bernice here has everything under control, isn't that right?'

'Has he gone?'

'What?'

'Adrian,' Benny whispered. 'Has he gone?'

Jason whirled around. The door was swinging noiselessly shut. 'Yes, he's gone. You really can't stand having us around, can you?'

'Jason. Shut up.' Benny sank back onto her pillow. 'I asked Bev to help me because I couldn't ask you.'

'Why not?' asked Jason. Adrian's appearance had interrupted the flow of Jason's rage, and despite himself, he felt his indignation abating. He lowered himself into a seat next to Benny's bed. 'You know I'd do anything for you, or for Peter.'

Benny licked her lips, her mouth suddenly too dry to talk. 'I know how to save Peter, but I couldn't risk you finding out. You'd never let me do it.'

'Do what?' Jason's eyes searched her face, desperate for clues. 'What have you done?' Benny reached across for his hand, gently entwining her fingers with his. 'I sent Bev to find Avril.'

Jason's breath caught in his throat. 'Avril Fenman?'

'She's still down there, under the Collection.'

Jason felt the ground rush away beneath him. 'You want one of her crystals, don't you? You're going to swap bodies with Peter.'

'It's the only way to save him, Jason.'

Jason yanked his hand out of Bernice's grip. 'That's crap, Benny, and you know it. You're just going to throw your life away. Is that it? One last, noble sacrifice? You know what I think? If you weren't so scared of living the rest of your life in the dark, you wouldn't be so bloody fast to give it up! You'd find another way!'

'I'd die for Peter if I had 20/20 vision and could see through walls, you moron!' Jason held out his hand. 'Give it to me.'

'I don't have it.'

'Oh, come on, Benny, you wouldn't have told me your plan if Bev hadn't already given you the crystal. I've got to admit, you chose the right person for the job. I'd never have been able to convince Avril to give it up that quickly.'

'I had Bev tell Avril it was to save Peter. He's her son too, on some level.'

Jason snorted with disbelief. 'And she went for that? A woman so ruthless that she's used those crystals to swap bodies with hundreds of people just because the fancy took her, and she suddenly discovers her maternal side? Hell, if I'd been stuck in the body of a balding, fat, middle-aged man for that long and a reasonably attractive woman turned up wanting to nick my soul-swapping crystal, I'd have just...' Jason's eyes widened. 'Bloody hell, Bernice.'

'You have to understand, I had to offer Avril something she couldn't

refuse. I couldn't go myself, she'd never transfer to a blind woman, and I wasn't going to give her you or Adrian. That's why I couldn't ask you to help.' For the first time since losing her sight, Benny was glad she couldn't see Jason's face. 'I had to have the crystal. For Peter.'

'That's why she nearly went for me in the corridor. She thought I was on to her...'

'I knew it was Avril, Jason. When Bev got back here with the crystal I apologised to her about letting you torture her in the Occupation. She had no idea it was Moskof who tortured her, not you. The second she left, I called security to pick her up. She won't get far.'

'That's not the point, Benny,' Jason murmured. 'The point is that you know what it's like to have your soul ripped out and you stood by and let Bev walk right into it.'

'I didn't have a choice.'

'Yes, you did, Benny. You could have asked your friends for help instead of trying to prove you could do it all by yourself. I won't let you sacrifice yourself or anyone else. There'll be another way to save Peter, and I'll find it.'

He was gone. Benny listened to him racing away down the corridor, until she could no longer hear him. Just to be sure he really had gone, she counted to ten before moving.

Swiftly, Benny hopped from the bed, too desperate to let the stabbing pain all through her legs slow her down. She didn't have long — Jason would tell everyone about her plan, and they'd stop her. She groped to the table by the door and ran her hands over its surface to locate the crystal.

It was gone.

Panic rising in her guts, she brushed her hands across the table again, then again, faster this time, her composure failing. Falling to her knees, Benny scrabbled on the floor, ears straining for the tell-tale tinging of crystal on tile in case her hands knocked into it, sent it spinning away across the floor.

Weeping with frustration now, she widened her search, scuttling across the ground on hands and knees. She cracked her head on a chair as she clawed through the darkness, felt blood ooze down her temple. Still she swept her hands over the floor, cursing to herself: he's taken it, he's taken it.

When Dr Wt'hlrm found her some minutes later, Bernice Summerfield was curled in a ball on the floor, howling uncontrollably. Calling for a nurse to assist, he held his patient close, strong, metallic arms pinning her until her struggles subsided. Wt'hlrm was relieved when his assistant arrived to administer a sedative, not so much because his patient was once more under control, but because by the time she

awoke his shift would be over.

It would be someone else's job to tell her that her son was dead.

Bernice had said that he'd seen the crystal just lying there. Knowing what it did and what Bernice had intended to do with it, he'd taken it and headed straight to Peter's room. He'd turned off the life support, reasoning that if Peter's body was already dead by the time the doctors figured out what had happened, no one could force him to switch back.

No one could stop him.

Benny's shoulders trembled as Hass held her. 'I could have saved him, Hass. If I hadn't wasted all that time trying to do it all myself I could have saved him.'

'Professor Summerfield?' A young man in the livery of the Collection's shuttle service stood a few metres away. Hass had been so caught up consoling Bernice that he hadn't heard him approach. 'Your shuttle's ready to depart.'

Hass released Benny from his embrace. 'You had better go, Bernice. If you do not leave soon the witch's trail will grow too cold to follow. You must not fail to recover Miss Tarrant.'

'You're right. Give me a second.' Sweeping her hands through the air at waist level, Bernice located the gravestone and ran her palms over the cool granite. Tears welling in her eyes, she bent her head to the rock, and, in a voice so small Hass could barely hear it, murmured the two words she'd been trying all morning to utter.

'Goodbye, Adrian.'

Walking Backwards for Christmas

By Ben Aaronovitch

See that woman there. She used to hang with the most important man in the universe. One day she decided she couldn't take the responsibility any more and gave up the travelling life. I don't blame her, he gave up the life too, and he knew what the consequences were going to be. I blame him — but that's a different story.

See that woman there. All she's got to do is walk three metres, maybe five steps at most, and pull the power cord from the wall. With the power gone the end-of-history machine shuts down and they can all retire for tea, cakes and recriminations. But things have turned all metaphysical now — so I doubt it's going to be that easy. The flesh is willing but the spirit has drifted off into the past.

I love Benny as a girl. Fifteen years old and her feelings still show on her face although like every other teenaged girl she believes herself to be utterly inscrutable. Sunlight and tree shadows fall across her back as she scrapes away at the ground. The uniform jacket she stole from the academy is tied around her waist, the mimetic laminar on its sleeves sluggishly changing colour with the shifting of the light. However she tells it later, Benny didn't run away from the academy, she staggered off under eighty kilograms of army surplus survival gear.

The thing she's scraping the ground with is a standard colonial-issue mark six tool (entrenching), manufactured from weighted carbon fibre, sharpened in the Russian manner and guaranteed to keep its edge. Benny has been notionally trained in its use for digging shelters, foxholes, barbettes, bunkers and, as an absolute last resort, attacking the enemy. Although when Benny pressed her instructor for details he just smiled and told her to aim for the eyepiece.

It was once used to kill Marine Commando Li Tom Chantelle during a brawl at the Dancing Greenie at the Wadi Shah Wali Wu on Mars. Twenty-three years from now Benny will wake up from a deep sleep and recognise the rusty red stains she remembers on the entrenching tool as blood. For half an hour she will seriously consider mounting an investigation into whose blood it was before going back to sleep and forgetting all about it. The unfortunately shortened Li Tom Chantelle had a sister who was almost famous but that's a different story — there are so many different stories.

You can drown in all those stories if you're not careful.

She's making a sunken debris hut, an A-frame shelter made from sticks and leaves, massively insulated and invisible from the air. She's going to layer her IR dispersal poncho into the roof to break up the infrared signature — just in case the school sends some drones out to look for her. This is her second year out and they haven't come looking yet.

The War is entering the phase known later as 'the grinder' and it's killing young people faster than their replacements can be born. The human race is already getting desperate — soon that desperation will take them down stranger, darker paths. One of those paths will end on a planet called Heaven in a blaze of fire. But that's not important now.

So far the school Commandant has lost two brothers, one sister, two nieces, one uncle and four old school friends. Under the pressure of the war her life has become flat and two dimensional. She reckons that Benny will either die or come back a better soldier — she hasn't considered any other options. She doesn't believe in miracles.

This debris hut will have its doorway east facing and overlooking a drop which will not, Goddess willing, end up as a snowdrift. Benny is not making that mistake again. She woke up last winter dying of hypoxia, sealed into her shelter by two metres of compacted snow. If she hadn't had her blaster she would have died, if she hadn't woken up she would have died, if she hadn't been on her own...

The smallest modern military unit is not the individual soldier but the binome — two soldiers. A binome can handle an infantry support weapon, a binome has 360 vision, it has someone to stand guard while the other does those necessary human things that humans do, even on a battlefield. It has twice the body heat in a badly thought-out debris hut.

Remember troopers your personal weapon might jam, fire support can evaporate, ECM can be countered and that MV you were counting on can get itself smeared across the Forward Area of the Battlefield Area. You don't have to love your binome, you don't even have to like your binome but by the Goddess you are responsible for your binome. If she stumbles you will catch her and if she falls you will carry her and if she is taken by the enemy you will personally fetch her back.

Benny scrapes at the ground with her entrenching tool.

Fifteen years old and all her emotions still show on her face.

She thinks her face is showing determination but she's wrong.

What it shows is despair.

It would have been better if the responsibility had been imposed on her but Benny doesn't even have that excuse. The military cling atavistically to the notion of martial lineage and in the monoplane landscape of the Commandant's mind the daughter of Admiral

Summerfield was potential. And Goddess knew they needed potential.

So they made her section leader — responsible for all the girls of dormitory Foxtrot India Zulu. She found maintaining discipline frighteningly easy, dredging up memories of her father's manner. The slight shrug of the shoulders, the tactical use of irony, keeping eye contact and the deployment of the strategic silence. Sharing the memory of her father felt like a betrayal of herself. As if his memory was water left over from a dry river and she was squandering her inheritance. Wasting on strangers the love she had carefully hoarded since his death. It killed her a little bit each day to do it but the girls lapped it up.

There's something to military lineage — I should know.

Foxtrot India Zulu paraded in fine style at reveille and Benny's face showed something that could be mistaken, at a distance, for pride.

After she ran away, a girl called Mariatu Smith took over as section leader. She'd watched Benny's technique and two years later graduated first in her year. She went on to officer training and ultimately joined the 563rd Armoured Infantry as a company commander. Three years later she was killed in action during the retreat from Solidad on Monty's Folly.

Bernice keeps an image of Smith and related biographical data hidden on molecular storage strips tucked into the case of her Vicar of Dibley DVD. She has similar files on all 11 other members of Foxtrot India Zulu — only three of whom survived the war. She knows that, just like Smith, she might be dead had it not been for Lucy Amandla.

Every section has its runt and Lucy Amandla was Foxtrot India Zulu's. She was a plump, moon-faced girl who could injure herself playing hopscotch. None of the other girls were going to take her as their binome partner so, as she believed her Father would have done, Benny took Lucy on herself.

Waifs and strays, Sergeant Major, waifs and strays.

Benny tutored Lucy in her own free time, held her hand in the foxholes, kicked her right foot on parade and showed her exactly where the arming cap of a mark three infantry support weapon should go.

Lucy Amandla did not improve. Her drilling was abysmal, her field craft was non-existent and the firearms instructor refused outright to issue her with live ammunition.

This was all grist to the wafer-thin mind of the School Commandant. To her this would be a test of character for both girls — the leader and the led.

And so it was — after a fashion.

Within the narrow orbit of the school their struggle became epic. Bovine indifference versus energetic charisma, bets were laid as to

who was going to break first. The other girls of Foxtrot India Zulu watched with the same horrified fascination one might reserve for a pair of crash test dummies on a terminal run. You couldn't be sure of the details but you knew it wasn't going to end well.

Benny tried harder.

Military training is all about breaking complex operations down into simple tasks. The soldier drills until the simple tasks become second nature and thus complex operations can be undertaken on the battlefield where the individual may be lacking sleep, adequate time and, in some circumstances, vital organs.

Benny broke the simple tasks down into even simpler tasks and believe me that can't have been easy.

It made no difference.

Benny tried a different tack. Benny started to think psychological. She bribed an older girl with access to the school records and checked Lucy's medical and psyche evaluations. Like most of the girls Lucy had lost her parents in the war, had spent some time in transit before arriving at the school. She hadn't been injured like Jody Frost, or suffered bombardment like Wu Shonzi and Benny herself. She displayed, as far as Benny could determine, no symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder or any other violence-related psychosis and there were no genetic abnormalities that would effect her mental health.

The girl was just a lump.

A great fat intransigent lump.

Something had to give and in the end it came down to square bashing.

At morning parade Benny led her section through some standard evolutions, they were the last section onto the quadrangle and the whole school was watching. As they fell into their assigned spot in the formation Mariatu nudged Benny.

'Section leader,' she hissed. 'Look.'

Benny looked. Lucy Amandla was standing placidly near the centre of the quadrangle.

By tradition a cadet section leader carries a blade, in Benny's case an archaic sword bayonet, a twenty-first-century imitation of a Napoleonic-era weapon. She was curiously unsurprised to find it in her hand as she advanced on Lucy Amandla.

The fat girl watched her approach placidly.

'What is wrong with you?'

Lucy looked around the quadrangle, as if she thought the question might be for somebody else.

'Why don't you ever listen to me? I'm just trying to save your life.'

Lucy looked back at Bernice.

‘You can’t escape this war, sooner or later it’s going to come to you and if you aren’t ready to fight then you’re just going to die a stupid pointless death. And because I was your section leader it’s going to be my fault.’

Lucy’s mouth worked slackly. ‘Sorry Section Leader,’ she said.

‘Do you want to die?’ asked Benny. ‘Is that it?’ Benny pushed out her bayonet until the point was millimetres from Lucy’s breast. ‘We’ve only practised in the VR rig but I’m pretty certain I can do it with one thrust.’

There was something in Lucy’s eyes that Benny wasn’t expecting, something like pleading. And there was something in Benny’s heart that Benny didn’t like, a real desire to do it. To thrust her bayonet into the fat girl’s chest and end her suffering there and then.

‘Sooner or later,’ said Benny, ‘You’re going to have to make a choice.’

‘What does it matter? I’d just be one more,’ said Lucy.

Benny dropped the bayonet.

‘Then you can do it without me,’ she said.

The whole school watched her walk across the quadrangle and back into the school. Mariatu took Lucy to the infirmary and morning parade recommenced. Benny’s survival pack was already packed for the day’s scheduled exercise. She quickly scooped up her library book and her solid-state reader and stashed them into one of her pockets. Mariatu had a survival manual and the collected works of Jane Austen, Benny took those as well.

A rapid visit to the quartermaster’s store yielded cold-weather gear and survival rations.

Then she slipped out of the sally gate and into the woods.

What does it matter? I’d just be one more.

Time to find out.

I love Benny as a girl because for her each moment is as new and as fresh as a snowflake. Sunlight and tree shadow drift across her back as her entrenching tool skitters off something hard. She swears and stabs the ground with the sharp end, something breaks.

Archaeology, Bernice will tell her students 51 years later, is all about what’s left. Sometimes it’s about what’s left after some clumsy archaeologist has hacked through it with a trowel.

Benny has already dug through two postholes, the discoloured ghosts of where wooden building posts had stood, without recognising them for what they are. But fired mud bricks are a different matter, they’ve lain in the ground like history mines just waiting to be discovered. Even a teenager can’t miss them.

Benny reaches down and picks up a shard of brick. With its straight

edges she knows it can't be a natural formation. She crouches down to have a closer look and uses the discoloured edge of her entrenching tool to scrape soil away from the next brick along. She knows that, officially, this planet harboured no indigenous tool-using life forms. She also knows from Infantry Recon Principles that given the surface area of an entire planet — things get missed.

Two weeks later Benny will have uncovered three whole courses of the ancient wall. She incorporates the remains into the design of her debris hut, a fact she is too embarrassed about to ever reveal to a professional archaeologist.

Three weeks later she will have her first visitors. Mariatu and Lucy will bring her chocolate and gossip. Communication protocols will be established and secrecy sworn.

Benny carefully scrapes soil away from the next brick.

She still thinks her face shows determination.

What it really shows is interest.

The retreat from Solidar was a real meat grinder of a battle. The kind where the sheer weight of the violence collapses in on itself so that the truth can never escape. Both sides claimed victory but only the enemy knew that they were lying.

Neither side had orbital superiority and it was fought out in the old-fashioned way. The enemy were intent on wiping out the entire civilian population seemingly from sheer caprice. A classic bit of psychological warfare. Remnants of the 11th Guard Army had to cover the retreat of two and a half million civilians to the secure Starport at Elektra Mons and then form a rearguard until the shuttles had launched to safety.

In the end it came down to what was left of the 563rd Armoured Infantry holding the old access road up the eastern face of the mountain. The 563rd fought for 12 hours and suffered one hundred per cent killed or wounded. The civilian shuttles got away. It was compared, of course, to Dunkirk.

I was at Dunkirk and trust me that was nothing compared to Solidar.

There is a school of thought that claims Solidar as the true turning point of the war. These historians argue that the fact that the majority of the civilian population escaped extermination helped to fatally undermine the enemy's mystique. From that day on, they argue, humanity, and their Draconian allies, would fight on with renewed purpose, with something more important than logistics — hope.

And the enemy scaled down their tactics, just a bit, just a little less aggressive, perhaps even a tad more cautious.

Professor Bernice Summerfield has never given her opinion on this

subject. The last person to ask got wine spilled down their front.

Lucy Amandla did make a choice. She chose to be a soldier, a good one, so good that she graduated second in her year. She was acting CO of the 563rd on the slopes of Elektra Mons and was killed defending her own HQ. Her last words are famous.

'Don't you get it yet?' she yelled at the enemy. *'We're just too stupid to lose.'*

I love Bernice as a young archaeologist, the verve, the energy, the manic need to live up to her fake credentials. This is before you-know-who and you-know-what and everything that followed on from that. Before all that history.

Xenon lights cut her face with shadow, they've been set at an oblique angle to the wall to bring out the contrast and make the carved ideograms clear enough to scan into a computer. She's in chamber Alpha IV of what has been tentatively identified as a ritual complex three kilometres from the native settlement of Jakkolo on the south-western continent of the second planet of the Hib 34598 system. This is the Trans-Coal Sack, as far from the war as you can get and still cross-breed with the local humans.

The planet is inhabited by cute furry bipeds with neolithic technology, slash and burn agriculture and no social organisation above that of the band. The world is a plum, a paradise of human compatible vegetation with little in the way of predators or disease. Naturally at least two trans-stellar corporations want to move in and start large-scale colonisation. Equally as naturally the local sapient rights organisation wants to prove that the bipeds deserve protection under Chapter Nine of the Basic Law.

In the absence of any technology beyond that of the Stone Age, they have to prove sapience, sociability and potentiality. The first two have been done but the last is harder; deliberately so, the test was included after corporate lobbying by the trans-stellars. They have to prove that the furry bipeds have the potential to progress beyond their current techno-social level. The test is designed to make it easier for corporations to move in and exploit the natives. After all, if they're not going to develop then exploiting them is hardly going to interfere with their development. As cynical political manoeuvres go, you have to admire its purity.

Case law on the issue was clear, any race that had in the past maintained a sophisticated culture was, ipso facto, capable of doing so again. So when they found the ruins west of Jakkolo they were halfway there. The other half was to be provided by a team of archaeologists headed by the young, the energetic and, above all, the cheap, Professor Bernice Summerfield.

A paid gig in a good cause — who could ask for anything more?

I love Bernice as a young woman, she still hasn't learnt to hide her feelings. She thinks her face is reflecting concern but what it shows is despair.

Machine translations are a necessary evil for an itinerant galactic archaeologist but Bernice has never trusted them. Yesterday afternoon she read the text the machine gave her and immediately deleted the file. Then she came down to Alpha IV herself and started a manual translation.

The team have nicknamed the site the Theatre of Jakkolo because of the horseshoe-shaped chamber at its centre. It does have excellent acoustics but the ranks of depressions around the chamber, each big enough for three or four natives, have led her to a different conclusion. She believes that this was a form of parliament, a debating chamber, with delegates gathering in small groups in each depression. There are examples of this kind of decision-making in the literature — each group comes to a consensus and then seeks to build a consensus at the next higher level.

It can be a very slow way to make decisions and that may have been what killed them.

Chamber Alpha IV is important because the neutrino count points to the interior engravings being the youngest. Even without the N-count it is clear to Bernice that the lettering is less well finished than elsewhere in the Theatre complex; carved in haste she thinks.

Her diary is on her lap and open at the pages where she has done the manual translation. The machine translation was correct, the cute furry bipeds are not indigenous to this world. They arrived 300 years ago in their own starships and proceeded to wipe out the native inhabitants.

Thirty years later she discovers that the furry bipeds were a cult group that had escaped persecution by the militant vegetarians of their own home world. They believed in the simple natural life of the hunter gatherer and to this end they conquered and ate the original inhabitants before consciously abandoning all their technology. Which made them, in Bernice's opinion, both evil and stupid.

At the time of her discovery, humanity had yet to make first contact with the fearsome Pakhars.

Chapter Nine only offers protection to indigenous sapiens, the not-so-cute furry bipeds don't count. The trans-stellar corporations can move in and exploit the hell out of them. Personally Benny's not sure she doesn't approve.

If you can blame the current generation for something their ancestors did. The activists are going to be disappointed. Bernice is

going to tell the truth.

See that woman there, she knows I'm watching. The savannah stink is in her nostrils and the hot sun on the neck. I'm not asking for much, just five paces and a flick of the wrist.

She once killed a man on Salisbury Plain. The pilot of a helicopter with a single shot from a handgun at a range of fifty metres. It was an impressive shot and the School Commandant would have been so proud.

Sometimes inaction is not an option.

I love Bernice as a mother, she's so reluctant and confused. It makes the rest of us feel so much better.

She doesn't know where she was walking all she knows is she cannot take another step. She can't breathe. It's as if someone has caved her chest in with a mallet. Surely that pain is caused by splintered ribs piercing into her heart and lungs. She has lost control of her body, her limbs flop around her torso like water balloons. She thinks she should be doing something but there's a loud voice in her head saying that her son is dead.

Her son is dead.

She made it out of the office on automatic. Away from the concerned but slightly disappointed faces of the Fifth Axis officers. They know she's valuable, a real prize, so they don't crowd around her. She could use this chance to escape, but halfway across the lawn the great hollow future fell on her out of the sky and drove her to her knees.

To have children is to live in fear but to lose them is to extinguish the future. That is why fathers run into burning houses, mothers into the face of a tsunami and why Bernice stands paralysed halfway across a lawn.

It is easier to stop at that point. You don't have to kill yourself or anything messy and anti-social. You just stop living. Your body carries on walking around but you have ceased to exist.

I said it was getting metaphysical.

Come on, Benny, five paces and we're done.

Don't make me come down there.

Don't make me have to live again.

* * *

Fingers reach out, take hold, yank back and

Click

Benny shook the power cord at Doggles. The man cradled his head, like it was him she'd unplugged. He let out a low moan.

‘Let me make this as clear as possible,’ she said. ‘Undermining the space-time continuum is bad.’

For good measure she yanked the other end of the cord out of the end-of-history machine.

‘History is much better left in the past,’ said Benny. ‘Trust me on this.’

She realised that everyone was staring at her. Behind the crowd, sprinting over from the Mansionhouse, was Braxiatel. Seeing her, he changed mid-step into a casual stroll, that infuriating nonchalance he did, no cause for concern. She glared at him, he winked back. Knowingly. Like he’d seen right inside her.

She turned to the crowd of friends and colleagues and journalists and hangers-on, every one of them regarding her funny, like she was standing there naked. Peter, her son, sobbing into Jason’s arms. Adrian looking guilty. Doggles smirking like a naughty schoolboy, yet still cradling his skull.

Benny struggled to find her voice.

‘None of that happened to anyone else did it?’

Nobody answered. Nobody met her eye. Except Bev, looking at her like all was forgiven, like she understood now, like they’d shared something. Like they all had.

‘Bastards,’ said Benny.

Match of the Deity

By Eddie Robson

A knock sounded on Bernice's door, but she hadn't the interest to ask anybody to come in. After about a minute, the door opened anyway and Doggles walked in, still wearing his suit from the funeral: it had looked shop-fresh that morning, but the creases and rumples were working their way into it. He was starting to look more like himself as a result. This made it easier for Bernice to hate him, which was what she needed. She'd been sitting in here feeling numb, the way that one does, and she was getting bored of that. She'd like to hate for a bit instead.

'What do you want?' she said. Jason's death had proved to be a good excuse for Bernice to be as rude to people as she liked. She was trying not to get too used to it.

'You left early,' Doggles said. He removed his hat and gestured with it at her outfit. 'Black suits you.'

Bernice smiled a tight smile. 'Thank you. Not really worth killing a man just for the excuse of wearing it, though.'

'Well, no,' he said, apparently taking her comment at face value.

'What do you want?' she repeated, in precisely the same tone of voice as before. Doggles breathed in sharply. He took a nervous pace forwards, then his head twitched to look out of the window. 'I'd like to apologise,' he said to the garden. 'Hmm,' said Bernice. She reached into her handbag, pulled out a compact mirror and started to adjust her hair, then she looked up at him. 'Well, go on then.'

'I'm sorry?' he asked, not comprehending her.

'That didn't sound very convincing,' she said. 'Try again.'

'Oh,' said Doggles. 'Well. I am sorry. I'm sorry for what happened and I'm sorry for my part in it. But there's things I never explained. The history machine, you know how it was Axis technology?'

'Yes,' said Bernice. 'That was why I wasn't surprised when it killed people. That was why I was quite keen for it to be thrown down a deep hole and never ever seen again.'

'Well, yes. But I couldn't do that,' said Doggles.

'Why not?' demanded Bernice. 'What was stopping you?'

'It stopped me,' said Doggles. 'The Axis intended to use it for strategic purposes, for quickly accessing information. So each one of them would be genetically, symbiotically linked to its owner.'

'And you were linked to that one.' She considered. 'That must have been painful. What they did to you, I mean.'

‘I couldn’t not use it because it wanted to be used. I feel different now it’s gone. It had a strange kind of a hold on me, I think. It should have worked. I don’t know what went wrong.’

‘I do. It blew up and killed some people, including my ex-husband with whom I’d only lately become reconciled.’

Doggles looked pained. ‘Yes — for which, as I say, I do apologise.’

She looked him in the eye. ‘Okay.’

‘My apology’s accepted?’

She shook her head and stood up straight. ‘No. But now I’m going out to drink. I’d rather you weren’t there, so please try to avoid me.’

Bernice strode out of the room, leaving Doggles to keep the silence company. This seemed to her only fair, as he was the one who had created it.

Eight years later

Bernice had only had four hours’ sleep when the call came from the Embassy. It was Inacht, an Attache for Interplanetary Affairs, letting her know that the expert she’d called for had arrived and asking when Bernice would be able to join them. Bernice asked if it was strictly necessary to join them at all, since Inacht was in possession of all the facts and the newcomer had already been furnished with all the information about what he was required to do. Ergo there was no reason why he couldn’t just get on with it, leaving Bernice to go back to sleep.

According to Inacht, however, the newcomer had not read the briefing material on the way here, even though said brief had been quite, well, brief, and was insisting upon talking to Bernice. It was also inferred that he was making rather a nuisance of himself.

Bernice shuddered, signed off, fell into some clothes, snatched some breakfast in the hotel lobby and headed across the plaza to the green-grey sphere that was home to several off-world embassies. Inacht was waiting for her at the sixteenth-floor reception. So was Doggles. Bernice caught the tail-end of their conversation: Doggles was complimenting Inacht on her English and Inacht was explaining that she had spent four years at Earth’s Thyloid Embassy — which, like most of the embassies of the Westward Arm planets, was in Newcastle. The experience had left noticeable traces on her accent.

To Bernice’s initial dismay, Doggles had re-entered her life a little over five years ago: after taking up her post at Mars’s brand-new and still remarkably shiny Jackson City Academy, Bernice had discovered that Doggles also lived in Jackson, pursuing private-sector temporal research. Over occasional encounters since then, she had noted that although he was still arrogant as hell in conversation, the history machine disaster had instilled in him a carefulness and consideration

which he disguised as perfectionism — to the chagrin of his employers, who preferred quicker results. In addition he had revealed a surprisingly generous spirit, at least where Bernice was concerned: most notably, he had convinced his company to sponsor the fledgling Academy when a significant financier dropped dead without updating his will, endangering Bernice's job and by extension her entire career. Although prolonged exposure to Doggles still brought up painful memories, she found him tolerable. She had almost accepted the mitigating circumstances for his actions on their first meeting (particularly as similar victims of Axis experimentation had come to light since that time). Unfortunately he had interpreted this as meaning that the two of them were in some sense friends, and so treated her to the numerous casual slights and insults to which his friends were apparently well accustomed.

Inacht suggested that they move to a conference room and Bernice and Doggles followed her. As usual, Inacht was moving quite slowly and Bernice could feel that Doggles was about to initiate conversation, just to fill the time. Unable to bear the anticipation of his opening gambit, Bernice handed him the receipt for her breakfast. 'Since it was you who insisted on dragging me out of bed,' she declared, 'you can put this on your expense account.'

Doggles shrugged, took the receipt and pocketed it. 'Professor Summerfield. Haven't seen you for ages.'

'No,' said Bernice tersely.

'How's the family?'

'Family?' Bernice's brow furrowed. 'When did I last see you?'

Doggles considered for a second. 'Must have been the Olympus Mons millennial.' He nodded to himself. 'Yeah. When was it, ten months ago?'

'Was I pregnant?'

'Yes.'

'Ah, then you won't have heard. Did I tell you about how I got involved in that ridiculous quest for the Bo Staff of Graz?'

Doggles laughed. 'Oh. Yes.'

'Yes, well, as it turned out it wasn't funny. My pregnancy wasn't a natural conception: it was the Curse of the Staff.'

'Capital "C", capital "S"?'

'Mmm.'

'Nasty.'

'So, when my daughter was born she aged to adulthood in the space of a couple of weeks, at which point it became apparent that she was an identical but evil version of me. I'll warn you, I tend to make light of this because it was so profoundly disturbing.'

'I can imagine.'

‘And so that put a bit of a strain on Alex and me. We split up, about six months ago. Which is a shame, because Peter really liked him.’

‘What about the daughter?’

‘God knows. But if you ever meet me, and I’m blonde, and a bit younger, and my face is twisted into a cruel sneer, don’t do jokes. They annoy her.’

‘I’ll bear it in mind,’ said Doggles. ‘Actually, I can imagine that blonde would suit you.’

Bernice stopped walking and glared at him. ‘Are you suggesting that my evil twin is better looking than me?’

Doggles considered. ‘Well, I’d have to see her —’ Bernice was about to ask him if he wanted a slap when they arrived at the conference room and Inacht invited them to sit. The room was absurdly large for just the three of them, because it was designed to accommodate about a dozen Thylods and the large shells on the females’ backs required plenty of room for manoeuvre. Inacht’s shell was particularly large and splendid, and she had had it expensively decorated. Apparently the Thylod males considered it attractive, but that probably said more about their own inadequacies.

The three of them seated themselves on stools around the table. Doggles, uncomfortable with the lack of a back to the chair, slumped forwards. Bernice opened up the bag she was carrying and removed her breakfast, a white slab of nutri-stuff (‘GUARANTEED DIGESTIBLE BY 94% OF ALL KNOWN SPECIES!’ the wrapper thrillingly announced). ‘Do you have any coffee?’ she asked Inacht.

‘I think the Ambassador might have some. I can try to get it for you in a bit.’

‘If you would. I’m sorry but I’m chemically addicted to it, you see.’ She addressed Doggles. ‘Right. I gather that you didn’t read any of the briefing stuff I sent you?’

‘No,’ said Doggles. ‘I had to finish up an article.’

‘It was a six-day trip,’ Bernice pointed out, and took a bite of the nutri-stuff, which was warm and bread-like.

‘It was a seven-day article. Can’t you just give me the gist of it?’

Bernice turned to Inacht. ‘How much are you paying him for this?’

‘Don’t worry, I’m sure it won’t be more than you’re getting,’ Doggles replied. ‘Actually it almost certainly is,’ said Bernice hotly, ‘as they’re not paying me anything. I was doing a dig over on Paremor —’

‘On where?’

‘Paremor,’ she repeated: but Doggles looked blank. Bernice tutted. ‘The planet directly next to this one.’

‘Is it nice?’

‘Well, the weather’s quite pleasant, but the death threats from evangelical priests are a bit of a drag.’

‘Oh.’

‘Yes, “oh”. It’s a deeply religious culture, but the basis of the religion is completely bogus. They worship some tree thing that they insist is a gift from their gods. Actually it comes from here.’

‘We’ve been doing space travel for nearly twenty generations,’ said Inacht. ‘The first visit we made was to Paremor.’

‘Well, I suppose it’s convenient,’ said Doggles.

‘It seems like the planet accidentally got contaminated with a bit of our flora and fauna. One of the plants that grew over there was a chelid tree, which is red — they don’t have anything red on Paremor, so they found it very impressive.’

‘They assumed it was sent by the gods,’ added Bernice. ‘It overturned all their theological beliefs practically overnight. It’s very interesting; archaeologically you can see the whole civilisation changing direction. It’s very rare indeed and under-documented at the moment, so that’s why I’m doing my next book on it. It’s still in the very early research stages at the moment, but I may call it, *It’s Amazing What You Can Extrapolate from a Tree*.’

‘Mm,’ said Doggles. ‘Does sound interesting. Should do better than your last book, anyway.’ He turned to Inacht. ‘So they’re under the impression that you’re their gods?’

‘Er, no. They hate us,’ said Inacht. ‘On another mission later on, our astronauts found the chelid and thought they’d better dig it up and bring it back. The Paremorbin caught them at it and killed them slowly.’

‘Harsh,’ said Doggles.

‘Now,’ said Bernice, ‘they have a collection of sort of Sacred Cuttings where they put the bits when they do some Sacred Pruning in the Sacred Garden. A couple of them were stolen a few weeks back by a Thylod —’

‘Who was a criminal, by the way,’ Inacht said hurriedly, ‘not part of an official expedition.’

‘Sorry, yes,’ said Bernice. ‘Right when I was in the middle of my dig, a few miles away. They thought I was responsible and dropped by my site to collect them. They hate having visitors at the best of times. This is why their civilisation’s under-documented. It took months of negotiation before they let me do my survey.’

‘And?’ said Doggles.

‘I escaped. My two postgrads are still down there.’

‘Oh, dear. Hope they haven’t been ritually killed.’

‘So do I. They’re my best students. If they don’t come back I’ll have to give the Carter Prize to the girl who did her dissertation on what the decomposition of paper cups tells us about a society.’

‘The Paremorbin don’t like leaving their own planet because they’re

really sensitive to atmospheric vibration,’ said Inacht. ‘To them being on a different planet is like listening to loud, tuneless, off-key music constantly.’

As a jazz aficionado, Bernice found this prospect not unappealing.

‘But if they don’t get these cuttings back soon,’ Inacht continued, ‘they’ll come looking and nobody wants that. They’re not an amicable bunch. Now we haven’t found the thief but we think we’ve got the right cuttings.’

‘Does it matter?’ said Doggles. ‘You must have these trees all over. Can’t you just give them a couple of bits that look similar?’

Bernice snorted. ‘They have priests who’ve looked at these things every day of their lives. One cutting does not look just the same as another to these people. They may worship a tree and ritually slaughter passing strangers, but they’re not stupid.’

‘They weren’t the only chelid cuttings we found at the thief’s place,’ said Inacht. ‘He had a lot of collectors lined up to buy the Sacred ones —’

‘Ah...’ said Doggles, leaning his head back and grinning. ‘And he had several similar ones to pass off as the genuine article, thinking that the collectors won’t own up to having bought stolen property.’ Inacht nodded. ‘We think his plan was to wait until Professor Summerfield’s book came out and raised the profile of the Paremorbin and their ways.’

‘Obviously he hadn’t heard how many copies her last one sold,’ Doggles murmured to Inacht across the table. ‘Or how long it took her to finish it.’

Bernice bit her lip and breathed deeply. He wasn’t making this easy. ‘Doggles, last time I saw you, you were working on a technique to extrapolate the origins of organic matter, or you said you were. How’s that coming along?’

‘If you mean is it advanced enough to identify which tree a given twig came from, then, yes, it can do that in the time it takes you to look at it,’ said Doggles, looking self-satisfied. ‘It can establish all the living molecules which it’s been connected to. It’ll tell you where the tree grew, when it was planted and possibly even the identity of anybody who might have urinated on or near its roots.’

Bernice grimaced. ‘Eww. That won’t be necessary.’

‘Shall I bring the cuttings in?’ asked Inacht.

‘If you’re ready?’

Doggles spread his hands. ‘By all means. Have my case brought in and I’ll get on with it. I could probably make the next shuttle home.’

Inacht nodded, stood and left the room. Doggles watched her.

‘Nice-looking girl,’ he said.

Bernice folded her arms. ‘I can’t believe you asked for a fee to come

here.'

'I assume there's a formal contract? I can't start work without one.'

'Yes,' she sighed. 'Yes, I'll go and get it.'

Bernice had to admit that it was quite remarkable to watch. Once scanned into Doggles's system, the tree appeared to grow out of the cutting: the soil make-up established the original position and it was even possible to theorise the weather conditions under which it had grown. This further helped to identify the two stolen cuttings from the fakes. Just before lunchtime Doggles started to pack up his things, satisfied with a profitable morning's work.

'Hey, hey, hang on there,' said Bernice when he asked what time the next shuttle off-world was. 'You're not done yet. Your contract states that you agree to do everything specified in the brief.'

Doggles gave her a sideways glance. 'There is nothing else.'

'How would you know?' said Bernice. 'You didn't read it, did you? You might want to skim it quickly before you book your return seat...'

Doggles frowned, opened his palmtop and located the briefing pack. He scrolled down and read. 'Thylus blah blah... Sacred Tree, blah blah extrapolation, blah blah leading expert in the field i.e. me...' Then he stopped reading out loud and started just reading. He looked up at her, alarmed. 'I'm not doing that.'

'Really?' said Bernice, dangling the contract in front of his nose.

The remaining problems were twofold. Firstly, any Thylod who set foot on Paremor would be murdered, and the Paremorbin weren't happy about Bernice either. So they had to work out another way of giving the Sacred Cuttings back to the Paremorbin without reprisals (Doggles had suggested just dropping them on a fly-past, which Bernice dismissed as far too risky — if the cuttings broke, the Thylods were as good as toast). Secondly, Bernice's students, Dieter and Ssal, were still down there, and hopefully still alive. Bernice's plan to solve these problems required Doggles's cooperation, which she now had in writing.

Doggles asked, not unreasonably, how she possibly imagined they would get away with it. 'What makes you think they'll just accept that we're a couple of their gods?'

'Easy,' said Bernice. 'Easy, easy, easy. You know how the Paremorbin are highly sensitive to atmospheric vibrations? Well, there's a key which, if you can reproduce it, makes them very suggestible. It's almost like a kind of delirium. Now, their gods take on many forms, mainly because all the sightings of them are made up. In my humble academic opinion, of course. The only consistent things about the recorded sightings — there've been seven, by the way — is that there's always a god and a goddess.' She pointed at Doggles, then

at herself. 'They quote a load of scripture from the sacred text, The Loose-Leaf, when they appear. And they're always red.'

'Ah,' Doggles replied. 'And I'm red. There's a coincidence.'

'Not really,' admitted Bernice. 'There were plenty of other people I could have called in to play Spot The Relic. This was the part I really wanted you for.'

'What about you?'

'I shall be disguised as one of your lot.'

Bernice had been quite blasé about this aspect when the plan had occurred to her, but as her shuttle neared the surface of Paremor and she sat in a comfortable recliner with an array of probes sliding into her arm, she remembered how ill DNA patchers made her feel. A long time ago, even for her, she'd had her teeth looked at in a dentist's near Twickenham in 1998. The DNA patchers were like the sensation when you had anaesthetic in your mouth, so you feel like your teeth have swollen up, but all over your body: additionally, her brain rebelled against the disorientation and felt like it was performing backflips. Truth be told, the patchers made everybody feel this way but most people pretended they didn't because they were so incredibly useful. Her skin was taking on a brighter pinkish tint, but at this stage it looked little different to that time she'd done some ill-advised noonday overtime on a dig on Vulcan. Doggles sat in a chair opposite her, reading a book. The cuttings lay in a case on a table, suspended in a kind of quasi-stasis field.

Bernice told Doggles to turn his book off and concentrate on what she was saying. 'We're just going to tackle a few of them,' she said. 'That should help avoid trouble. The gods never appear to lots of people at once, so that won't seem unusual. They'll be impressed, and they'll do whatever we say, but remember to flatter them. If they think we don't like them, or that we're maybe displeased with them, they might just decide they fancy having some different gods. They're not overly loyal. Above all, apart from encouraging them to leave Thylus alone, preferably forever, we do what they expect of us. Right?'

Doggles mused for a few seconds. 'I'm not sure I approve of this,' he said. 'Morally, I mean.'

'What?'

'Well, you say their whole society is founded on a chance misapprehension of the significance of a tree.'

'I do say that, yes, in my new book.'

'Well, by posing as their gods, surely we're consolidating this false belief. I don't really like that. I've always seen myself as more of an enlightenment figure.'

'Listen,' said Bernice in irritation; her head was becoming woozy

from the transformation. 'I've studied this civilisation in quite some depth, right? And I've come to the conclusion that their fascination with this bloody tree may well be all that keeps them from wandering the universe giving planets a random kicking because they don't like the angle of their rotation. Now get that bit of sacred text memorised.'

They waited until after nightfall to land. The Sacred Garden was located at the top of a scaffolding-like complex in a reverent, secluded spot outside Scubb, Paremor's capital city, so they were able to land quite close to it, in one of the many canyons which creased much of the planet's surface. They argued about what to wear, eventually settling on loose all-white suits, then made their way to the complex under cover of darkness. It was at this point that they realised that all-white might not have been the wisest choice of attire. In order to make it seem as though they had appeared spontaneously, they crouched down behind a parked tractor and rolled a magnesium grenade towards the main entrance.

Bernice scratched her shoulder again.

'Why do you keep doing that?' asked Doggles.

'It's my skin,' Bernice complained. 'It feels... I don't know... rough.'

'It's meant to feel like that. It looks fine.'

'I didn't know you people only had three toes.'

'What's wrong with having three toes?'

'Nothing,' said Bernice defensively. 'It's just... balance-wise, you know. And how do you do anything with this hair? It's like pine needles.'

Doggles was about to retort when the grenade exploded.

'Have you got the case?' Bernice asked.

'Yes, I've got the case,' said Doggles. 'I've had the case since we landed. I've had it every time you've asked. Hadn't we better get out there?'

The two of them straightened their clothes, gave each other a small nod, then stepped out from behind the tractor. The grenade was still blazing but, just as Doggles had assured her, Bernice's modified Cahlian eyes could see through the light without much difficulty. They stepped up to the entrance gate and waited for the harsh glow to die down: gradually the two Paremorbin at the gate were moving their arms away from their eyes. They were powerful humanoid creatures, not thickly built but tall, straight and solid-looking. Their skin was a little off-white. They held unnervingly sophisticated-looking pulse weapons and stared curiously at Bernice and Doggles. Curiosity quickly gave way to suspicion, which showed signs of stepping aside for rage.

Bernice had abstractly considered the consequences if her plan did

not work. Now, as she reached for the pendant around her neck, she momentarily understood the full implications in horrifying detail.

She stroked the back of the pendant and it started to emit a mellifluous tone. The security guards reverted to confusion, but a calmer confusion than before. 'Who are you?' one of them asked.

Doggles engaged his translator and launched into the bit of scripture he'd been given. It was word perfect. Bernice thought he hammed it up terribly, but it went down a treat. A few minutes later, they were on their way to see the priests on duty.

The two priests — one male, one female, dressed in identical asexual habits appeared to be the sort of earnest types who wouldn't dream of inventing encounters with the gods in order to further their own positions within the church. Indeed, this was probably why they'd been saddled with night duty. To ensure that the 'sighting' wasn't discredited, Bernice told one of the security guards to fetch somebody more senior whilst they waited in the comfortable environs of the Sacred Garden (which was actually more of a large patio with a single tree in the middle).

In the meantime, the priests cautiously requested that Doggles bestow them with a prophecy. Although their voices were fluid, they spoke in a highly formal language that clearly did not come easily to them and contrasted sharply with the cruder speech of the security guards. The priesthood, it seemed, had a way of using the language which marked its members out from the riff-raff and these younger members were still becoming accustomed to it.

'Very well,' said Doggles, the Paremorbis tongue flowing sing-song from his throat in a manner which the priests clearly envied. 'It shall, in time, come to pass...'

The priests looked perturbed and muttered to each other.

'Is something the matter?' enquired Doggles.

'Forgive our impudence,' said the male priest awkwardly, 'but we had anticipated that the prophecy would be communicated in the traditional manner.'

'Traditional?' asked Doggles.

'Yes. Through the, er, subtle and venerated medium of dance.'

Doggles just stared at him for a few seconds. 'Right,' he said. Then he turned to Bernice.

Bernice, who was unaware of this particular tradition and was keen to learn more of it, nodded. 'We do what they expect,' she whispered.

What then transpired was beyond Bernice's capacity to describe, although she hoped that she would later manage to physically recreate sections of it for the amusement of friends, acquaintances, and anybody who had ever met Doggles. He started to dance in an

awkward, shambling fashion. The cliché about Cahlians was that they were graceful, elemental creatures: Doggles, whose existence had always implied the fallacious nature of this cliché, was now demolishing it singlehandedly. Bernice tried to keep herself from laughing and pointing, but failed dismally: when the priests observed this they assumed that it was a part of the ritual and imitated her, so that Doggles now found himself in the centre of an open area, dancing very badly, whilst three people pointed and laughed at him. When the dance was over, the priests seemed very pleased and launched into a discussion about what it might mean. This discussion became heated and very nearly came to blows, and Bernice and Doggles had to separate them.

About an hour later, a more elderly Paremorbin turned up and it was quite amusing to see his expression change from irritation at being called down here at this hour — possibly involving an intent to have those responsible defrocked — to awe and reverence. He spoke more easily than his younger colleagues, but it was less that the speech came to him naturally, more that he was well practised in its control. He introduced himself as Rhyff.

‘What are your names?’ he asked Bernice and Doggles, eager to be on first-name terms with his deities.

‘Er...’ said Bernice. Nothing she’d read had specified any names. They were just The Gods, and opinion varied on how many there were.

‘I’m afraid that they are unpronounceable in your mortal tongue,’ said Doggles. The priests nodded sagely. Bernice turned to Doggles and mouthed, Nice.

Bernice invited them all to take a seat, then she began. ‘First of all,’ she said, ‘we wish to commend your righteous isolation from your neighbouring species. You have shown great wisdom in this regard, and if you continue to conduct yourselves in this impeccable manner then the path to enlightenment will be smooth.’

The assembled Paremorbin nodded, pretending that they had assumed a stance of non-contact with other cultures because they believed it was righteous, rather than because they were a lazy bunch of misanthropes. So far so good.

‘My fellow celestial here,’ Bernice continued, ‘would like to return your Sacred Cuttings.’

Doggles stepped forward on cue and handed to Rhyff the case containing the cuttings. Bernice could see that Doggles was starting to relax into this.

Rhyff gleefully removed the cuttings from the case and verified that they were bona fide. ‘We prayed for this to happen and it has come to pass,’ he said. ‘Has the perpetrator of this foul crime been punished

accordingly?’

‘Yes,’ said Doggles.

‘Was it the heathen Earth woman?’

Bernice considered this for a few moments. ‘Yes. Yes, it was. We had her killed. Painfully.’

Rhyff beamed. ‘Good.’

‘Mmm,’ said Bernice, mildly disturbed by the evident pleasure he had taken in this. ‘But her colleagues were quite innocent and it is our wish that they be released.’ She had to bite her tongue to stop herself from adding, Is that all right?

The priests didn’t seem too sure about this. Rhyff noted that they had been planning to put the students to death in a few days’ time, as an example to other off-worlders.

Bernice hesitated. ‘We... ah...’

‘We wish the woman’s colleagues to enter into our service,’ said Doggles, ‘and to act as missionaries on their heathen worlds.’ Again, the priests nodded sagely. Dancing aside, Doggles was quite good at this. One of the younger priests was instructed to contact the city jail and have the students released and transported here. This would, Bernice and Doggles were informed, take a couple of hours.

Again, the priests had an idea for passing the time. Rhyff approached Bernice.

‘As you have seen,’ he said, ‘our land is arid. We are anxious to restore its fertility.’

Bernice felt enormously clever. She’d guessed that they might ask them to do something like this: the area around Scubb, never the lushest of landscapes, had steadily died off as industrialisation had increased unchecked in the city. There was now no arable land for hundreds of miles and although Scubb’s status as the industrial capital and religious Mecca had maintained its prominence, it was increasingly held to economic ransom by healthier farming states. Hence, Bernice had brought with her a cluster of nanites which, although they couldn’t regenerate the whole area, would suck up pollution from a few dozen square miles like detergent and encourage the retention of nutrients in the soil. The technology was a fair way in advance of anything the Paremorbin had and, with the aid of the suggestive influence of the tone, should be accepted as a heavenly miracle cementing their appearance as instant legend. She smiled a soporific smile and told the priest that she and her fellow deity would be delighted to undertake this task for their subjects.

The priest beamed and pointed at Doggles. ‘So you and he will perform the mating ritual, then?’

Suddenly Bernice didn’t feel quite so clever.

With a few cagey questions, Bernice managed to establish what was involved in the mating ritual. It was, unfortunately, as simple as it sounded, and she admonished herself for not having anticipated it from her studies of the gods' previous reported appearances. It had been described so politely and abstractly that she hadn't noticed it, but with hindsight it was definitely there. The sightings had largely been invented by lonely, celibate priests who had spent long hours staring at a tree: it shouldn't have been surprising that the stories would have involved some celestial shagging to liven things up.

Having established what was expected of them, Bernice switched off her translator and conferred with Doggles. 'We can't go through with this,' Bernice said.

Doggles affected to look perplexed. 'Was it me who said we should do what they expect of us? Oh, no — that was you.'

'You do realise that they intend to watch this.'

Doggles shrugged. 'We'll never see them again.'

'You're loving this, aren't you?'

'Whether I am or not is neither here nor there. If we don't do it they'll probably kill your students and us and they may also decide to declare holy war on your gastropod friends on the next planet over.'

Bernice closed her eyes, took a deep breath and turned to face the elder priest. It was a constant of nearly all cultures that, at an early stage, they developed a form of alcohol, and she gave thanks for this fact as she asked the priest if he had any.

Presented with a selection of intoxicants, Bernice chose the one that tasted like tequila and retreated to a side room (which appeared to be a potting shed) in order to 'prepare'. She drank to Jason several times, apologised profusely, and eventually thought he'd answered her to tell her that he understood why she was doing this, it was okay with him, et cetera. Yeah, actually, this was very Jason Kane. He'd have found this whole thing hilarious.

At one point Doggles came in to check whether she was ready and she'd been about to bawl him out when she noticed that his shirt and shoes were off, and much of his torso was a mass of twisted, puckered flesh. Bernice abruptly found herself unable to speak at all. Doggles had occasionally referred to some remaining scars from his time as a 'subject' of the Axis: although the toughness of his skin meant that it reacted poorly to even the niftiest regeneration techniques, he'd had the scars treated and grafted by specialists, and said that they had gradually improved over the years. Bernice had never asked to see. Now that she was staring directly at them, she tried not to imagine what they'd been like when they had been fresh. Doggles followed her line of vision downwards, saw what she was looking at, and absently

traced the line of a couple of scars with his finger. She told him that she'd be out shortly, and he smiled and left.

Bernice sat in the darkness for a few minutes, thinking. Or maybe she was just drinking.

Then she slipped off her clothes, straightened her spine to walk as tall as she could manage, and stepped out of the side room with the particular grace and lightness of touch that only the extremely drunk believe themselves to possess. She declared that the mating ritual could now begin. Doggles was waiting for her on a low plinth; the three priests kneeled in a row at a respectful distance. It was almost dawn.

By this stage her students had arrived, and were waiting in a corner of the Sacred Garden to be taken home. Bernice did her best to avoid eye contact.

* * *

The shuttle ride back to Thylus was, to say the least, tense. Bernice claimed that the DNA patch was making her feel ill again and shut herself in her cabin soon after take-off. After a few hours had passed, she summoned her students to come and see her. The patch wouldn't wear off for at least another 24 hours, and Dieter and Ssal were plainly disconcerted by speaking to their usually avuncular supervisor whilst she was still red-skinned and yellow-eyed. Dieter commented that she looked 'kind of like Satan'. Bernice reflected that this might aid her in engendering the sense of fear which she generally struggled to muster in these situations.

'As you may be aware,' she told them in clipped tones, pacing up and down in front of them, her hands behind her back, 'my actions back there were specifically geared towards saving you from being publicly executed as an example to others.'

The students nodded.

'This being the case,' she continued, 'I feel you owe me a fairly substantial debt. Do you agree?'

The students agreed eagerly.

'One small way in which this debt might be repaid is to never, ever speak of today's events to any living soul. Or any dead ones, as you'll find occasionally happens in this line of work.'

The students nodded again.

'There is one obscure exception to this rule,' she added, holding up a finger. 'If you hear a report of this event from anybody else, it will have originated with Doggles. It will almost certainly glorify his role in it. You are to attempt to dissuade anybody who has heard the account from believing it to be true. If this fails, you are to tell them that you can personally vouch for the fact that he was crap.'

Dieter and Ssal looked at each other, and added their agreement.

Yes, they assured her, it was quite obvious to an impartial onlooker how poor Doggles's performance had been. Bernice was heartened by the ease with which they delivered this lie. They were, as she'd always maintained, very good students.

'Good,' said Bernice. 'I'm glad we're all on the same page. Now, let's pretend that none of this ever happened.'

By the time of their arrival on Thylus, Bernice was looking human again and taking delight in having her full complement of toes back. Much to the surprise of her students, she casually suggested to Doggles that he could cash in his return ticket and instead travel back to Mars with them on the private shuttle they'd chartered. Doggles was also somewhat taken aback, but accepted nonetheless.

Two nights later, Ssal was working at the table in the shuttle's communal living-space, transcribing from memory some of the tales she'd been told by the religious dissidents she and Dieter had been slung in with during their incarceration on Paremor. Thoroughly engrossed, she failed to notice how late it was getting: it was the middle of the artificially defined 'night'. She didn't, however, fail to notice a rising volume of chatter, giggles and other assorted noises emanating from Doggles's cabin, nor did she fail to notice Bernice emerging from said cabin in her dressing gown. Ssal had quite lost track of where everybody was, and had vaguely assumed that they were all asleep. The door closed behind Bernice and she turned to cross the communal area immediately outside, an action which brought her face to face with Ssal, who sat behind a portable terminal on the opposite side of the table.

They both froze.

Bernice stepped gingerly over to Ssal and they exchanged a few words about Ssal's work. Bernice eagerly agreed it might make the basis for a good article, then there was a quite a long silence. Bernice turned to leave.

'Professor Summerfield?' asked Ssal.

'Mm?' said Bernice, turning back.

'Are we still pretending that this isn't happening?'

Bernice smiled tightly and nodded. Then she obtained a carton of strawberry cheesecake ice cream from the shuttle's food dispenser and disappeared back into Doggles's cabin.

Over subsequent days, weeks and months, as Bernice relaxed and it became clear that there were to be no reprisals from the events on Paremor, Ssal — whose sense of humour was so dry that a camel could easily die trying to cross it — developed their little arrangement into a running joke.

A family emergency kept Ssal from attending Bernice and Doggles's

engagement party. She sent them a card: 'Sorry I can't be there. I'm still pretending that it isn't happening.'

Night of the Living Martian

By John Isles

The human collapses as my claw swings down upon her neck, making a heavy dull sound as it connects. She appears too shocked to scream, only her eyes react to my actions: staring goggle-eyed at my impassive face.

I step over the body of Bev Tarrant, slumped on the ground, those eyes now lifeless. They reflect dully the dim evening light.

Her last word was full of surprise and fear: 'Hass?'

I'm having a restless night. I have adjusted the environmental controls in my room a number of times over the last few hours, making it colder and colder. Despite this my body feels uncomfortably warm.

I turn in my bed, unable to settle. The events of the day go through my mind: I had trouble with an infestation of Pollardic worms. I was willing to use any measures to get rid of them. Eventually I used an experimental pesticide known by the graceful name NSM 361. It worked and now my Fuseratiums will be safe. Then I try counting imaginary sheep. I've been informed by my human friends that this can help.

After an hour of this I still cannot sleep.

Eventually at some point in the evening dreams take me. I am back on Mars, on an ancient battlefield. The air is chilled, I can see my breath and that of those loyal soldiers around me.

One of them approaches. His face is scarred on one cheek. I know that he received that scar saving me from a cowardly enemy assassin. I owe this man my life, he's like a son to me.

The man beats his claw across his chest in salute. 'General Vorzz.'

'Yes, Krag?'

'My lord, our scouts report the enemy have not moved their forces from the valley.'

'Hmm,' I say non-committally.

'You suspect a trap?' he asks. I nod. 'What are your orders, my lord?'

I survey the landscape: fog is beginning to roll in from the west, obscuring the rising sun — whose weak light reflects from Krag's visor. 'Take our men and come in from both sides.'

'Will you lead the assault, my lord?'

'No, I will remain here. There is something of great importance that requires my attention. I trust your skills in my stead.'

Krrag salutes and leaves with the troops. As they begin to ride off I enter my tent.

Inside is an old priest in a long white robe. 'My lord.'

'You have it?' I ask.

'Yes, my lord.' He moves towards the rear of the tent and returns with a small wooden chest. He holds it up to me. I reach forward and open the small clasp. As I lift the lid I am dazzled by the brilliance of the Crystal of Lexam.

It is the size of a large egg, its surface is many-sided, catching the light brilliantly.

The drawings of it in the ancient texts have not done it justice. I am in awe of its beauty. Now that I have the Crystal in my possession my heart races faster, the expectation of what I am about to do almost overwhelms me.

'This will do as the writings say?' I ask in wonder. The old man nods.

'Unbelievable,' I say. 'Why should I trust you?'

'Because you have to, my lord,' he says, as a smile crosses his face.

'You're right,' I say.

He smiles again. I draw my sword and take his life. I do it quickly, sparing him pain. He has served me well, but has now outlived his usefulness.

As I wipe his blood from my sword, I hear shouting and screams from outside. I rush to the tent doors and see that the enemy forces have sneaked into our camp. My men, unprepared are outnumbered and slaughtered. I could have prepared them, knowing what was to come, but the enemy must not suspect me. They must believe themselves to have won.

Despite my military prowess, I retreat to my tent and take the Crystal from its container.

I place it on the ground and kneel before it. I concentrate on the heart of the Crystal.

As I sit there I become gradually unaware of the sounds of chaos around me. Time passes. I do not know how long.

There is a disturbance at the tent's entrance. My beloved Krrag enters. His helmet is smeared with blood.

I look up at him as he raises his sword above his head. 'Worzz, I'm sorry. There's no other way,' he says as he brings the blade down towards me.

The sword easily slices through the carapace, and into my flesh beneath. I feel it lodge, torn lungs and viscera holding it tight. Such unexpected force from Krrag. Perhaps this is the Crystal's influence?

He places a foot on my chest to pull the blade out for a second blow, I see my own blood and innards drooling down the sharp edge. I

am too drained by his sudden attack to try to move. He thrusts the sword into my torso, and wrenches upon my chest. My insides spill to the ground — steam rises as their warmth mixes with the cold air.

I look into the face of my loyal son and see only anger and hatred towards me instead of love.

My visor cracks as the sword sweeps through my helmet. This is the last thing I ever see.

* * *

It is the middle of the night, no one is about. The die-hard-drinking students (and some members of the academic staff) are in their beds, or someone else's, by this time.

I see the building in front of me. It's one storey high, built in the style of a long-dead king from Earth. There are large French windows on all sides. There are no lights on, and no sign of the Collection's security staff

As I approach, I walk straight through a flowerbed containing my much-admired Venusian roses. I trample most of them under my heavy tread. They will not survive such abuse, their lives so easily ended.

Some instinct, like an inner voice is urging me towards this building. Nothing will halt my advance. I cannot stop. I know that this is wrong, but I cannot feel concern.

I do not know where this voice is coming from. The last I recall was going to bed four and a half hours ago.

I'm in front of one of the large windows, I raise my claw to smash the glass open. I hear a light footstep to the side of me. I turn towards it.

Standing there is someone I recognise though it's hard to be sure in the dark. Yes, it's Bev Tarrant — Braxiatel's PA. Although, she's practically running the Collection now. She can be very hands-on in her role.

I notice that her sidearm has not been drawn. Yet.

'Hass? There you are,' she says.

I want to answer — but I can't.

'I'm glad I found you. Are you okay?' I notice she is reaching for something on her belt. Before she can do anything I swing my arms towards her — squeezing my pincers together to fire a sonic weapon that isn't there.

For a moment she stands frozen to the spot. When she realises that her innards have not been scrambled she goes for her belt again.

Whatever she tries to retrieve she isn't quick enough, as I close the gap between us.

'Hass?' she exclaims.

I raise my claw to bring it slamming down onto her neck.

Shards of glass cover the floor, pieces still tinkle as they fall. Oddly, the alarm has not gone off.

I look around at the various items in their display cases. I cannot see the one I am here for. Something in my mind takes over, directing me to where I have to go. I begin moving towards the opposite side of the building.

The available light refracts off the multifaceted surface of the Crystal. My visor absorbs most of the light, but it still looks beautiful.

It sits behind toughened glass. The inner voice is beckoning me towards it. I cannot resist.

I saw it earlier today; being moved from one part of the Collection to another. The Killorans that were transporting it dropped the container. I was nearby and helped them load it back onto the transport cart. As I touched it I felt something. Imperceptible at the time, but thinking back I had an uneasy feeling rush through my body.

There is a legend surrounding the Crystal of Lexam: that it contained the essence of a great general, who aeons ago had conquered five galaxies. I do not believe in Martian folk tales.

Now that I'm here, I'm beginning to question that opinion.

As I approach the display case, lights come on all around me. A squad of security personnel — all of them Killoran — surrounds me. Even a Martian doesn't want to take on these seven-foot tall, dog-like creatures when outnumbered.

However, my common sense does not prevail. Instead the voice in my head urges me to reach for the Crystal.

I begin moving forward. As I do the Killorans draw their side arms. They're only taser weapons. My armour absorbs most of the electricity — it's barely more than a tickle.

Actually, it does slow my movements. But then moving in human-norm gravity isn't the easiest environment for me at the best of times.

The inner voice tells me to reach for the Crystal.

Electricity jolts through my body. They have increased the power from their tasers. Only millimetres away from my goal and I collapse heavily to the floor.

I lie motionless looking up at the high ceiling. I notice there are already cracks appearing in the new building's plasterwork.

A human steps into my vision: Bev Tarrant. I want to say, 'Bev, I am glad I did not harm you,' but my lips will not move. I offer a silent prayer of thanks to the Martian gods for sparing her life. I have not spoken to them in years.

She has a needle in her hand, ready to administer an injection. 'Hass, I'm sorry. This is the only way,' she says, before finding a gap in my armour. The needle slips inside me. I begin to feel drowsy. The

world is going dark. She's my friend and she's trying to kill me. The last thought that crosses my mind is: 'I will live on!'

I wake up in my own bed. I have been informed by the nurse that I have been unconscious for three days.

I manage to sit up, but struggle — feeling weakened by my experience.

When I am sat up I see Bev Tarrant sitting at the end of my bed. She is smiling. I return the smile — though I'm not sure she recognises that it is one. Never mind.

'What happened to me?' I ask.

'That's a good question. One that I just might be able to answer,' she replies. 'Do you remember the pesticide from the Botanical facility you were testing?'

'Yes.'

'It seems that the pesticide has unforeseen effects on the Martian physiology. From breathing in the chemicals you entered a cataleptic state. Which unfortunately allowed the intelligence inside the Crystal to dominate your conscious mind.'

And I thought she was a mercenary before coming here. A mercenary would never show such interest in one who had tried to kill her.

'Maybe your brother was right to object to us housing Martian artefacts?'

The mention of my brother makes me wince. I quickly move the subject away from him. 'Bernice would have warned us never to take any object with a history of possessing people.'

'True,' she replies ruefully. 'We should end this feud with your brother. We're not helping anyone, grabbing things just because we think he might want them.'

'No,' I say. 'But can you convince Mr Braxiatel of that?'

'He's not easy to talk to these days. I think Bernice took him by surprise. I think he thought she'd survive.'

'Yes.' I miss her too.

'And warring with your brother keeps him occupied. At least, it keeps me occupied, and out of Brax's hair.'

She shakes her head sadly. The Collection has become a sadder place all told, but I have made one more friend. Bernice would have been pleased by that.

'I thought I'd killed you. I'm sorry,' I say, now that I am able to.

'You weren't yourself. A part of you must have still been in control, held something back,' she says kindly. 'Besides, I'm tougher than I look.'

'What about the Crystal?'

‘It’s been taken to a very deep, high-level access archive and sealed in the strongest shielding that money can buy. No one else should go through what you had to.’

I do not like the idea of someone else controlling my body. The thought terrifies me — I could have ended another living being’s life. A thought occurs.

‘You could send it to Sset. That would achieve many objectives.’

Bev laughs. I have made a joke. She used to laugh more. All the humans did.

‘Maybe,’ she says. ‘You’re feeling better, I can see.’

‘Good. When can I return to my garden? There’s too much work still to be done.’

‘Yes,’ says Bev. ‘But I think we’re making progress.’

The God Gene

By Ben Woodhams

They came for her on the fifth day; a small guard detail who didn't expect much of a fight. Her only human contact had been the daily visit from the medic who'd stuck a needle in her arm, and a grunt through her cell door followed by a bowl of something that only vaguely passed as food. Now, however, there were guns levelled at her head.

'Up,' said one of the men. Their voicecoders and faceplates made it impossible to tell which. Her joints creaking, Bernice struggled to her feet from the hard wooden bed. A rifle motioned her outside, and she found her legs moving, stumbling out of the gloom into the light of the corridor. She seemed to have no say in the matter, a passenger in the vehicle of her body. A ghost in the machine.

The guards shepherded her, unresisting, past an endless succession of cell doors. Behind each, another poor soul awaited their own escort, out onto the firing range. There they would be blindfolded and, without ceremony, shot in the temple at close range. Just another cog in the most efficient killing machine the human race had ever devised — which was, Bernice had to admit, up against some pretty stiff competition. She might have been surprised at her lack of feelings about this, but whatever part of her brain was responsible for registering the horror seemed to have burnt out.

Finally, they came to a high-security bulkhead. The guard ahead of her touched his wrist unit and, with a hiss, the armour slid away, revealing a bare hand.

'Wait.' A distorted voice came from behind her. 'Let her do it.'

A gentle shove on the shoulder pushed her towards the blank surface of the door. Oh. Not blank; a cavity had opened up, and an articulated metal probe emerged, a silver hair projecting from it. Bernice stared at it, unsure what was expected of her. A guard tapped his finger in the air; she reached out and did likewise against the needle. A pinprick of pain, a tiny droplet of blood hanging from a silver thread. The probe vanished with a 'thwip'.

Was that it? Just another blood test? No — from deep within the walls Bernice could hear the clunking of machinery, the crunching of gears. With a medieval groan, the bulkhead swung upwards. Despite herself, Bernice recoiled from the light beyond, only to find a steady gauntlet at her back.

'Well,' grated a voice behind her. 'What we have here is either a

monumental security breach, or a very confused woman.'

'What's the difference?' came the reply.

'Forward.' Another encouraging thump on the back. This time, however, her legs had no mind of their own. They refused to operate at all. Instead, she pitched forward, her face heading directly for the pristine white floor. Blimey, she thought as she crunched into it. Someone's going to have a hell of a job cleaning up if they shoot me in here.

'Oh, bloody hell,' came an electronic voice from somewhere far, far above her. 'I keep telling Travers: why not render them unconscious before we have to shift them?'

'Lieutenant Summerfield?'

Clean linen. How long had it been since she'd slept in clean linen?

'Lieutenant Summerfield?'

Oh, go away. Her fingers ran over the soft crevices in her bedclothes. 'I know you're awake, Summerfield.'

The light level on the other side of her eyelids was creeping up. Urgh.

'Lieutenant Summerfield, of the so-called Resistance of Light. Supposed heroine of the Battle of Petrocia. War criminal, responsible for the death of more than 230,000 Enlightenment troops. Implicated in the commission of 56 terrorist actions on 37 worlds. Do I have your attention, Lieutenant?'

Bernice sat up, and instantly felt a jolt of pain tugging at her right arm. Squinting, she saw a drip — Nutrients? Psychotropics? — protruding from her arm and tore it out. A clot of blood fell from its tip, splashing across the bedclothes.

'Ah. I see I do. Comfortable?'

She ripped the sensors from her temples and chest, sending them scurrying back to the medidoc above her bed, and pulled her loose gown around herself. She was in what appeared to be a large, plush hotel room — except for the wall opposite, which was almost entirely taken up by a smoked mirror.

'Tut, Lieutenant. Awake for only thirty seconds and making a mess already.' Bernice scowled at the mirror.

'Professor,' she said.

'I'm sorry?'

'Not Lieutenant. Professor.'

'Ah. A glimpse into another life; one before all the pain and bloodshed. We're making progress already. Nevertheless, that was then and this is now. Come in, Lieutenant Summerfield. Your time is up.'

'How...' Bernice croaked, her throat like sandpaper. She swallowed.

‘I’m sure you’re full of questions, Lieutenant. How did we capture your little cadre of insurrectionists? Why aren’t you dead yet? What’re you doing in the high-security equivalent of the Galactapol Hilton? But, as I’m sure you’ll appreciate, I’ll be asking the questions for the moment. So why don’t you tell me? What do you remember?’

Bernice squinted at the mirror, trying to see past the smoky reflection of the room. Yes, there it was: the faint silhouette of a figure watching her through the glass. She tripped over the split-level step of the bed dais, and approached the mirror, keeping her eyes focused six inches beyond her reflection. Trying to avoid noticing the wrinkles around her eyes, the flecks of grey in her hair. I can see you, you bastard.

‘Lieutenant Summerfield,’ said the voice, and to her irritation it sounded faintly amused. ‘What do you remember?’

Before the noise. Before the explosion. At the safe house on Ictar, where Bev’s unit has been holed up for three days. A supply of water, but precious little food and no heat. Instead, she and Bev are huddled around the soft glow emanating from their prize — a passive-monitored cryptolink to the Ictaran security central dispatcher. It’s worth the hunger.

‘Here,’ says Bev, tapping the monitor with her Twilight, ‘here and here. Three charges, fifty pounds apiece. The last’s the tricky one — the security detail gives us only thirty seconds to place and arm it. We’d have to be quick, but it’s feasible.’

‘And the service centre falls,’ mumbles Bernice.

‘Yes. Cheer up, Benny. That’s supposed to be a good thing.’

Bernice lets herself fall back into a pile of mildewed cushions piled up against the wall, rubbing her face.

‘Estimated casualties?’

‘Hard to say. But four to five thousand, easy.’

‘Of which, what, sixty to seventy per cent will be military?’ She groans and hugs her abdomen. ‘Christ, I’m half-starved.’

Bev turns away, hunched over the monitor. ‘And the strategic value of Ictar will be shot to hell. What’s the matter with you, Summerfield? You weren’t this squeamish on Petrocia.’

‘That was different.’

‘Oh, really?’ Bev laughs. ‘In what way? Because they made you a hero? Because they thought you’d single-handedly turned the tide? Five thousand dead just small-fry to the hero of the revolution, hmm?’

Bernice sits up. ‘That’s not...’

‘Not fair?’ Bev spins round, jerking a finger at the basement steps. ‘You go up there, take a walk in the streets. You tell me what’s fair!’

She stands over Bernice, her arms folded. ‘This entire planet’s been cleansed, Bernice! Every single human being left alive up there — every

single one — is our enemy, whether civilian or military. And every single one would turn you in like a —'

Then the noise. The explosion. Bev's body spinning away in a sheet of flame. Figures, moving through the dust and smoke.

Bernice placed her hand on the glass and felt, rather than saw, the silhouette beyond flinch away.

'Whatever I've done,' she croaked, 'however many deaths you pin on my chest... I'm still in the little league compared to you.'

Silence.

'You think so?' Then, 'Get some rest, Lieutenant Summerfield. You need it.'

On the sixth day, Bernice awoke and felt for the drip on her arm before opening her eyes. She winced as her fingers brushed against the bruise. They hadn't reinserted the needle, but the sensors on her chest were back. Off they came, leaving patches of sore, bright pink flesh behind them.

Her nose wrinkled. Something smelled good. Blinking, she saw an occasional table had been wheeled over to her bed. Breakfast — a good one. Five days of oily gruel, and now they were foisting panachettes and chumien juice on her. Unable to process much beyond 'surreal', Bernice sat up and shovelled the food down her complaining throat.

She looked around. Her interrogator hadn't been joking about the Galactapol Hilton. Well, he had, but without irony. Pushing the table away, she swung her feet onto the floor, massaging the deep pile of the carpet with her toes. A small door lead to an en suite, complete with shower. A prison cell with sophisticated spot lighting. What the hell?

She'd not been anywhere like this since the Collection, and that was a long time. After that, it had just been her and Bev, clinging onto the universe by their fingernails — grabbing transports where they could, eating whatever they could find. Stumbling through humespace with no greater agenda than survival. Until they found the Resistance — or, in truth, it found them. It offered them sanctuary, of a sort; a structure to fit into. It offered them a home and something to fight for. After the Collection, Bernice had needed to rediscover her ideals. Bev, she supposed, had just needed to fight.

A prison cell, thought Bernice. Don't forget that. Good cop, bad cop. Shit, and she'd almost fallen for it. Already, despite herself, she could feel her stomach tighten at the thought of having to return to the grey, windowless oubliette they'd kept her in. Or perhaps it was the panachettes.

This place did have a window: far out of reach, beyond the

medidoc, the bars across it the sole concession to incarceration. Fishing a small, nibbled corner of an unfinished panachette from her plate, she flicked it up towards the sky beyond. It didn't even reach the bars, evaporating with a fizzle and a wisp of smoke. Energy field. So, they didn't actually need the bars. They were just a reminder.

'Good morning, Lieutenant Summerfield. I do hope I don't have to go through the whole "Don't bother trying to escape" routine.'

She didn't turn round. 'Let's take that as read, shall we?'

'Excellent! Much more interesting things to discuss — your academic qualifications, for instance. You said you were a professor of...?'

'We both know I didn't.' The information was useless to them. They were just trying to get her talking, to open up. Bzzzt. Try again, chum.

'Oh, come now, Professor. I'm going to be straight with you.'

I'll bet, thought Bernice. The clicking of a fluorescent tube behind her caught her attention, made her turn to the mirror where a figure was strobing into view. A floor-length grey tunic beneath a youthful, smirking face, topped off with a halo of blond curls. Bernice tightened her gown around her.

'Aren't you a little young for this sort of thing?'

The space behind him was murky through the gloom. No, he was illuminated by proximity to the light tube. Even if he were floodlit, he need only take a step back to disappear.

'We're both of us older than we look, Lieutenant.' He flicked through a selection of notes on a clipboard — it was hard to tell, but they looked like medical charts.

'We've checked all extant records,' he said, looking up. 'Yet we find no mention of a Professor Summerfield.'

She couldn't help herself. Something in his smile goaded her.

'You wouldn't.'

'Oh?' All wide-eyed innocence. 'Why?'

'I...' Bernice stalled, rubbed her eyes. 'Have you been drugging me?'

'Yes.' No hesitation or remorse. 'Not lately, though. Any neurotoxins should be out of your system by now.'

Damn. She'd thought she'd last longer than this.

'My name is Professor Bernice Summerfield. I was the resident professor of archaeology on the Braxiatel Collection.'

Her eyes flitted up to meet his. He was staring at her, and she allowed herself a glimmer of pleasure at his shock.

He coughed. 'You were on the Collection?'

'Yes.'

'Twelve years ago?'

'Yes.'

'I'm sorry.'

‘Yeah, well. So am I.’

Running. Screaming. Bleeding. Peter in her arms, Jason right behind her, cradling his mangled hand. She snaps her head around, trying to shake the blood from her eyes. Turns to check he’s there, and he’s gone. She screams his name but the word is torn from her mouth, ripped away by the wind.

He’d left her, then, staring at her reflection, shivering in the silence.

After a while, she’d jumped at the sound of rifle-fire from the small, barred window. Muffled shouting some way off.

Then silence again.

This pattern repeated three times over the next few hours, before he came back.

He looked tired, and his smirk was gone.

‘I said I was going to be straight with you,’ he said.

‘Yes.’

‘You should know that there is nothing you can do, nothing you can say, to save General Tarrant’s life.’

Bernice sat on the end of the bed, staring at the floor, saying nothing.

‘Do you know why that is?’

A tremor in the shoulders. Barely a shrug.

‘Do you even know what it is that we do?’

‘You kill people.’

‘Yes. Specifically?’

‘You move from planet to planet. Human colonies. You process the entire population, of which sixty to seventy per cent are summarily executed. You’ve slaughtered countless millions, leaving the survivors with wrecked economies, ruined lives and sterile cultures.’

She took a breath.

‘You’re the architects of the greatest man-made atrocity this galaxy has ever seen, and you will not stop until every last human being who doesn’t conform to some petty, imagined, arbitrary criterion is dead or dying!’

She was standing in front of him now, the glass flecked with her spittle. She wasn’t sure when she’d started shouting. He did not flinch, looked her directly in the eyes.

‘Almost entirely correct,’ he said, ‘as far as it goes. Though our criterion is anything but petty. It is the best possible. It has to be.’

‘I don’t care what it is. Nothing you can say would justify the murder of human beings on that scale.’

‘Petrocia.’ A one-word response, accompanied by the return of that smirk. ‘That was different.’

‘Yes. Yes, it was. But not in the way that you imagine.’

‘Oh? Enlighten me.’

'You justify Petrocia to yourself as a desperate act of self-preservation. A last-ditch shot at survival for you and your men. You had no choice but to become directly responsible for the deaths of almost a quarter of a million men and women.'

'We were going to die.'

'Almost certainly. And if you hadn't done it, no doubt someone else would have. Your friend General Tarrant, perhaps.'

'Perhaps.'

'And how long would she have waited, I wonder? How long would she have delayed, prevaricated, agonised over the mass destruction of a quarter of a million human souls before doing what was necessary? How heavy do you imagine the heart of your friend would have been, Lieutenant Summerfield?'

'We have to go. Now.'

'What the hell for?'

Bernice checks her wristscreen. A mass of blood-red dots is swimming up her forearm as the scanner scrolls over a schematic of the complex. They flood through neon green corridors, depositing three-man units in each room they clear.

'Because the advance guard are in the green zone. They'll be on us in three minutes. Tops. This is hopeless, Bev. We're outnumbered fifty to one.'

Bev feigns unconcern as she and Crenlow affix the pinion guns to the floor.

'What you call overwhelming odds, I call a target-rich environment, Benny. So I'm gonna even those odds up a little.' She glances over her shoulder. *The 'chutes are right there, Lieutenant. Feel free.'*

Bernice steals a systems check on the three punchpods as Bev shows Crenlow how to loosen his pinion's pivots to allow for a greater angle of fire. Tally Crenlow is young, but experienced. He hasn't faced anything like this before, though. None of them have.

The schematic on her forearm scrolls to reveal their position by her elbow, enemy troops at her wrist. They have perhaps a minute.

'I'm not joking, Bev. Set the pinions and let's go.'

'Nor am I, Lieutenant. If you've got nothing better to do than bitch, get out of here.'

'Got a problem here, General,' says Tally from behind his gun, failing to keep the panic out of his voice. 'IR sensors of line.'

'Oh, yeah,' replies his CO in mock surprise. 'Mine too. I guess manual it is, then.'

Bernice snaps. 'Damn it, Bev! What do you think Adrian would have...'

'Adrian's dead, Lieutenant.'

'You don't know that.'

'Either way, he might as well be.'

'Right,' says Bernice, 'I'm going. Tally?'

Bev pulls up her visor and glares at the infantryman. 'You move from your position, Crenlow, and I'll shoot you myself.'

'It's all right, Lieutenant.' Crenlow smiles weakly. 'You should go.'

He's right. They can hear the muffled thuds of rooms being cleared down the hall. Shouting. Sporadic gunfire.

Bernice pulls the safety off her handgun and jumps into a punchpod without a second thought. She raises the butt of her side arm to crunch the launchbox, freezing at the 'crump' of a stun grenade in the next room. They're here. If she launches now, she'll give away Bev's position. And Bev knows it.

Tally and Bev, seated in their pinions, either side of the doorway. Bev's raised hand clenching to a fist. Tally opening fire, the door exploding outwards. The bodies of Enlightenment guardsmen, shredded by shrapnel and IM, flapping away like kites in a storm.

Their comrades' surprise is punctuated by the shrill blue light from Bev's pinion. She has a clear view down the hallway, alternating blasts with Tally as the enemy takes cover and prepares to return fire.

A careless guardsman appears, rifle at his shoulder, before Bev slices his torso in two. The IM field wings down the hallway, taking out the first troops of an intermediary unit coming to see what all the noise is about. Stunned, their comrades stumble over the flayed bodies and Tally takes their heads off. Somewhere, someone is laughing.

An explosion from the left — the Enlightenment unit next door has locked their position and taken out the wall. Bev is thrown clear of her pinion, scrabbling across the floor to escape incoming rifle fire. The other 'chutes are wrecked — she hurls herself at Bernice, jamming into a cubicle meant for one. She screams something, but Bernice does not need to know what: the butt of her gun crashes through the launchbox and the 'chute punches through six floors of ferroconcrete, blazing into the sky.

The acceleration is instant and unforgiving. Bernice clings to Bev, sticky with Crenlow's intestines, unable to move, barely able to breathe. The punchpod trembles as the force of a small nuclear explosion tears it a path through the atmosphere, but Bernice cannot hear the roar of the engines, the rush of the air.

All she can hear is Bev laughing. Laughing like she's fit to burst.

On the seventh day, she rested.

The eighth day began with a more conventional interrogation. Bernice was almost relieved: they wanted to know troop numbers, movements, strengths and weaknesses. Details of former campaigns, the organisational structure of the Resistance. It wasn't hard to duck their questions. Despite her notoriety, Bernice knew precious little. A heroine she may have been, but still, in the final analysis, just a field

commander. A glorified grunt. She'd been told only what she'd needed to know.

Her faceplated inquisitors seemed to understand this. Eventually, they left, fading away into the smoky reflection of herself.

After lunch, her blond interrogator returned, apologising on the chefs behalf for the quality of the omelette. Bernice suspected that collecting fresh eggs was not a tactical priority for the new Reformation.

This time he'd brought a chair with him.

'In it for the long haul?' she asked.

He sat. 'Why? Am I keeping you from something more important?'

She didn't laugh.

'Tell me,' he began, 'did you see any daisybirds during your time on Petrocia?' Where was this going? 'We called them flowerflies, if that's what you mean.'

'What did you think of them?'

Bernice wasn't about to open up that much. On her second day on the planet, a flowerfly had come flapping down from the trees, landing on her outstretched hand. She'd been fascinated.

'They're... interesting.'

He smiled. 'What are you, the mistress of understatement? They're extraordinary! Describe one for me.'

'Well, they're the fruit of the dominant arboreal life form on Petrocia's southern continent. They seem to mimic...'

'Yes?'

'They're clockwork birds. Natural flying machines.'

'Exactly! Machines. A confluence of bark, twine and floral membrane that does such a fantastic impression of a small bird that the species has managed to colonise almost the entire planet. I understand they also taste pretty good. So, when you first saw one...'

'I mistook it for a bird, yes. What's your point?'

He rose from his seat, looked at her.

'The history of humanity has been characterised by two great opposing forces,' he said. 'These are not, as is popularly imagined, simply good and evil. Or life and death. Our mission — which, as you've gone to lengths to point out, has involved the deaths of whole worlds — has been to ensure the eternal supremacy of one over the other.'

'Which are?'

'Does it matter?' His fingers brushed against his gauntlet, and Bernice was surprised to hear her own voice, strained and tearful, coming out of the speakers.

'Nothing you can say would justify the murder of human beings on that scale!'

‘That’s still true.’

‘But you need to know what you’ve been fighting all these years. You need to understand.’

‘Yes.’

‘It does you credit. And I could tell you. But there’s a difference between knowing something intellectually and understanding it emotionally.’

‘So I have to work it out for myself?’

‘Preferably.’

‘Try this,’ Bernice sneered. ‘You’re all psychopaths.’

That didn’t go down well. He glowered at her, the corners of his smirk twitching.

‘Professor Summerfield, if I were a psychopath I could easily enter your cell and slit your throat. Instead, I choose to keep you in relative comfort and feed you omelettes. For which, incidentally, I have already apologised. Try again.’

Determined not to be thrown off guard, she came right back. ‘General consensus in the Resistance was that you were some kind of secret religious sect, intent on...’

His laughter cut her off, and it took him a while to regain his composure. He sat down again, making a show of wiping tears from his eyes.

‘I’m sorry,’ he snorted. ‘It’s just that — hmmm! — that one gets better every time I hear it. I apologise. Really. Do go on.’

‘Is there any point?’

‘Well, I like a good laugh. But otherwise, to be honest, no, not really.’

‘Good. I was beginning to think this whole thing was just for your amusement.’

‘Not at all. There are those among us, Professor Summerfield, who feel that we are engaged in some kind of final battle. A war to end all wars. Not me. I know that the only lasting victory is to be won on the battlefield of ideas.’

‘Poetic.’

‘And, like all the best poetry, underpinned by truth. You accuse us of genocide, of the murder of countless homo sapiens. That is where you make your fundamental mistake. The truth is that the people we have killed are not.’

‘Not what?’ Bernice felt herself tense. Here it came.

He leaned forward, misting the glass with his breath.

‘Sapient.’

He let the word hang in the air, sitting back in his chair with his eyes closed, awaiting her response. ‘That’s insane,’ whispered Bernice.

‘Is it?’ His eyes snapped open. ‘Ever since our species crawled out of

the sea, we've been caught in a struggle between what we could be — should be — and the fact that we are creatures of flesh and blood. Are we luminous beings or nothing more than an elaborate mechanical system? Cogs of sinew, levers of bone...'

'Spirals of self-replicating DNA...' Bernice murmured.

'Quite.'

'Sounds like a religious thing to me.'

'No, no, no!' He dismissed the idea with a wave of his gauntlet. 'Religion is concerned with divining the meaning of life — a prime mover, as well as a code of conduct. What's at stake here is the possibility that there is a meaning. Not what, but if.'

'Hold on,' Bernice interrupted him. 'Let me see if I've got this. You've been perpetrating an interplanetary pogrom on a basis that's still TBC? To answer your question: yes, that's insane.'

'It's not a question of principle, Professor. It's pragmatism. None of us want to go to war over an introduction to philosophy.'

'Then why?' shouted Bernice, marching towards the glass wall and bringing her fist down on it. 'What were you thinking?'

'Why don't you tell me, Professor? Tell me about Petrocia.'

'Bollocks!'

Bernice can feel her heartbeat as she pans her scopes across the horizon. To the east, the sea sparkles in the distance. The gaping valley below is a verdant idyll, a stream snaking its way across the floor. What's caught her attention is the thick black line along the lip of the hill opposite, miles away. Enlightenment troops, preparing for battle.

'Got the feeling they knew we were coming?' Bev's aide-de-camp, Mahmoud Dessaine, stands at her shoulder. 'Numbers?'

'All of them,' sighs Bernice, lowering her scopes but unable to look away. They aren't even bothering to conceal their presence, small dots scurrying about against the sky, grouping into divisions, assembling artillery. They were used to this technology — the range of their guns probably extended behind Bernice's position. With the whole planet an IM deadzone, the Resistance's shells would be lucky to make it to the bottom of the valley. That didn't seem to deter Bev.

'Where is she?' asks Bernice, although she suspects that she already knows the answer. She's not wrong.

'Supervising artillery assembly in Grid 49,' replies Dessaine with a shrug. 'I don't know, I think she just likes shooting things.'

'She's not going to make it back in time, is she?'

'You want I should get her on comms?'

It wouldn't make any difference. Besides,' she nodded at the guardsmen massing over the valley, 'they'd hear.'

A whistle of air escapes Dessaine's teeth. 'So, we just wait to die, hein?'

'Looks like it.'

'But it isn't.'

'No.'

Bernice winces as her comms unit starts to buzz on her belt, shares a knowing look with Mahmoud.

'Hello, General,' she says, clipping the comms to her ear. *'And hello to all our Enlightenment chums across the valley listening to this unsecured communication. We hope you're enjoying the show.'*

'Shut up, Lieutenant,' comes the response, cloaked in static. *'We have movement. Repeat: we have movement!'* Bev sounds angry, desperate.

'Hold on, Bev. I can't... Oh, cruk.'

Mahmoud's gaze guides Bernice's eyes to the solid fuel rocket arcing away from Grid 49, plunging into the valley below, falling at least a klick short of the enemy.

'Bev, hold your fire! You over there, that was a mistake! Don't do anything hasty. There is no movement. No...'

Even as she says it, Bernice can see the line of Enlightenment troops thickening. It bulges until, fat and bloated, the ranks of the enemy spill across the horizon, pouring down into the valley. She should be issuing orders, rallying her men. She does not move. She can hear Dessaine slamming a cartridge into his rifle, Bev's voice on the comms.

'Do it, Bernice! Do it now!'

No IM weapons on Petrocia. No air support, precious few vehicles. No way to evacuate in time. No way to save lives. Just standard artillery shells and projectile rifles. And, buried deep under the earth of the hillside opposite, atomics.

The hill is black with the oncoming troops. Thousands — hundreds of thousands — of Enlightenment guardsmen. They are going to kill every last Resistance fighter they find. They always do.

'Dammit, Bev. You were supposed to be here.'

Bernice pulls the transmitter from her belt. A tiny thing, light and plastic. She doesn't think about it. She can't.

She feels Mahmoud take her hand in his, squeezing it gently. *'Now or never,'* he whispers.

She presses the button, feeling the safety wire snap under the slight pressure of her thumb.

Deep under their feet, there is a twang, as though the very elastic of the planet has given way. They watch as the hillside slips down into the valley, a tumbling avalanche of earth, trees and bodies. Then the valley itself slips away towards the sea at terrifying speed, taking the enemy with it.

Slowly, behind the terrible churning of the ground, Bernice becomes aware of another noise: the cheering of her troops. But she barely notices as they throw her into the air, carrying her away in a maelstrom of celebration. She's too busy crying.

Her voice, over and over.

'That was a mistake. There is no movement. No... That was a mistake...'

'Not easy being a hero, is it, Professor Summerfield?'

'No movement. No.'

'Stop it!' she hissed.

'Was a mistake.'

'Was it?'

'Was it *what*?'

'A mistake...'

'Stop it!'

'There is no movement. No...'

The recording snapped off with a click.

'No,' Bernice echoed herself. 'No, it isn't easy.'

'Good. It shouldn't be. Butchers we may be, Professor, but no movement in the history of mankind has held more reverence for human life.'

She scowled. 'You seem very choosy about what you call human.'

'Not at all. Ideologies become corrupted. Religious orders become tainted. Philosophies are bent to evolutionary, mechanistic desires and agendas. The enemy is demonised. So we have removed ideology from the equation.'

'How?'

Again, his fingers brushed against his gauntlet, and an armatured probe appeared from the wall beside the mirror.

'It's a zero-sum question,' he said. 'Yes or no. Think of it: a gene for self-transcendence. Sentience coded into the very fabric of the human genome. The ability to recognise that there is more to the universe than simple, inert matter. To move beyond simple, animal instinct. Tap the needle, please.'

Outside, from what she assumed was some kind of courtyard, Bernice could hear a commotion. Indistinct voices, threatening, getting closer. She held her hand above the needle.

'Ours is not an ideological crusade,' he continued. 'Our pogroms are neither religious nor racial.'

From the window came the sound of screaming. Someone screaming her name.

Accusing her of betrayal, swearing vengeance, promising death.

Bev.

'We cut out the dead wood,' he said. 'It's a matter of survival.'

He paused, letting the sounds of Bev's struggle trickle through the window.

'I'm sure you can relate.'

Trembling, almost by accident, Bernice's finger scraped across the

tip of the probe's needle. It vanished into the wall. He was still talking, although she could barely hear him over the blood rushing in her ears.

'We could take a child, a non-carrier. Subject it to the appropriate life experiences and pseudo-emotional stimuli. Create a creature whose responses to any given situation would be almost, if not exactly, the same as General Tarrant's in every significant respect.'

Behind Bernice's tears, a single word appeared on the wall above the probe.

Carrier.

She felt her legs give way, and slumped to the floor. Her stomach convulsed as she tried to breath against the nausea gripping her body, forcing itself up into her diaphragm. She tried to shout, to cry out, but all she could hear was the wet slap of her meal hitting the floor.

Then, beyond the window, the sound of screaming.

'But not you, Bernice. You're unique,' her interrogator smiled. 'We're not trying to brainwash you. To make you like us. We don't have to.'

The crack of a rifle from the window. Silence.

'You already are.'

Writing in Green

By Dave Hoskin

‘Can you tell me a story?’

From far away came the sound of something laughing. It swirled in and out of audibility, the cycle getting faster like a machine winding up. Voices bubbled through the sound like oxygen. They laughed, they cried, they struggled to make themselves heard.

They fell silent.

For a moment there was no noise at all. Then a second wave of voices surged forward, male and female merging into one another. They trembled on the edge of making sense, and disappeared like ghosts.

The last wave seemed to come from all sides. Crashing and roaring, words discernible for the first time, it drowned out any other sound.

And a second voice answered the first.

It said, ‘This is a story about writing in green.’

‘Have you ever been in love?’ said Jason Kane.

Hass concentrated grimly on his gardening. He ran the sonic shears around the edge of a banksia bush, leaves singing in the ultrasonic as they fell to the ground. ‘Well?’ Kane persisted. ‘Hass?’

With a sigh, Hass stood up. He wondered whether it was hot because it always felt too hot on the Collection, or because he was uncomfortable. ‘Can you help me move the acacias into the grove?’ he said.

‘You’re avoiding my question.’

‘Very observant.’

‘If I help with the plants, will you give me an answer?’

With a hiss of irritation, Hass reached for two small acacia trees. Kane moved in front of him, blocking his way. Hass glared at him, and Kane’s eyes flicked away nervously. He was putting on a brave face, but Hass couldn’t miss his agitation. He still struggled with the subtler nuances of human body language, but he could tell that Kane wasn’t just being annoying. He took a deep breath. ‘Yes,’ he said.

‘Yes, what?’

Hass gritted his teeth. ‘Yes. I. Have. Been. In. Love.’

Before Kane could ask any more questions, Hass passed him two of the acacia plants. He picked up two more himself, and without another word, set off toward the acacia grove. Struggling to keep pace, Kane was left trailing behind. He dropped one of the plants in

his haste and by the time he had managed to catch up with Hass's long strides they were halfway to the grove. It took him another minute to get his breath back and then, to Hass's horror, Kane whispered, 'I need your advice about what I should do with Benny.'

'Kane,' hissed Hass, 'The words in your head have escaped again.'

'I'm serious.'

Hass began walking faster. 'Did you know that on Earth the acacia symbolises the future?' he said. 'Martians believe it represents children, but it can also mean fire, plague and unexpected violence.'

'Come on, you like Benny don't you? You want her to be happy?'

'Marigolds,' continued Hass, 'were ground into a tea that cured toothache...'

'I know you won't tell anyone, and I swear I won't either. Hass...'

'Just over there you can see what humans call red willow. Martians wear it to ward off evil...'

Kane stopped. 'You've never liked me have you?'

Hass turned to look at the fragile little man behind him. Kane looked away again, and Hass could see that he was trembling. 'What advice do you need?' Hass said, wearily.

'This makes you uncomfortable doesn't it?'

'Does it show?'

He set off again, walking slowly so Kane could keep up. They were getting close to the acacia grove. The trees were bigger in this part of the garden, and high above them ghost gum trees reached towards the sky. 'I'm not really a romantic kind of guy,' Kane began. 'But that's what I need to be. I'm trying to plan the perfect day. I'd do it myself, but the thing is, I need it to be *new*. Ever since...' There was the briefest of pauses as Kane mentally shifted gears. 'I'm not the guy I was before, and that's where you come in. I need someone to help me, a new voice. I need to be able to say things to Benny I've never said before.'

Hass frowned. 'Why do you need me for that?'

'Because I'm worried she'll dump me before I can do it on my own.'

Hass waited for the punchline. There wasn't one.

Soberly, he pushed back a fringe of ferns and stepped into the grove. Placing the acacias on the ground, he motioned for Kane to do the same. He began to dig. The grove was his favourite place to work. He was getting used to the Collection's warmer atmosphere, but it was still places like this that felt most like home. He finished digging and gently shook an acacia from its little plastic pot. Crumbling the dirt away from its roots, he placed it gently into the earth.

'There will have to be rules,' he said firmly. 'Rule one: we do this my way.'

The shoots should have appeared by now. Hass crouched down in one corner of the grove, peering between blades of grass. A certain amount of the writing was up to the plants themselves, but he was concerned they weren't going to grow as high as he wanted. At least the general shape of his design was beginning to solidify, and the traditions of sowing and pruning had all been dutifully observed.

Kane was doing his best to help, but explaining the principles of writing in green had not been easy. It wasn't the first time Hass had cursed his translator, but the style and idiom were not the easiest concepts to grasp. Matters weren't helped by the fact that Kane was too keen to get on with doing something to really listen. Consequently, while he genuinely wanted to help, Hass had still been forced to correct most of what he'd done. Kane just didn't seem to understand that the garden had to do most of the work itself: the gardener chose the language, and largely left the plants to develop on their own.

However, even allowing for glitches in communication, Hass was unhappy with how the grove felt. He was sure he was missing something, but right now he couldn't say exactly what it was. Part of the problem was that writing about love was a delicate task, and Martians didn't really use writing in green for those kinds of stories. Normally the form was employed for declarations of territorial sovereignty, matters of historical record or epic poetry. Using it to rewrite the grove as a valentine for Bernice would look stunning, but he wasn't sure he'd really captured the right emotions.

Hass was fond of Bernice. She had been the helpmeet he'd needed when he'd arrived on the Collection, and she had played a big part in his decision to stay. It was more than just being friendly — she had made him feel that he belonged here, had something to contribute. There was nothing romantic about his feelings for her, but he could tell that they had already crept into the design. It probably didn't matter: the whole point of the writing in green was to express how Kane felt about Bernice. Amid all that, Hass's own contribution should be virtually invisible.

Frowning, he delicately pushed the grass aside once more. At last, he saw a green finger uncurling from the dirt. It had appeared just in time. The writing in green had begun.

When Kane arrived, Hass handed him a pair of sonic shears and told him to climb the grove's tallest tree. Full of enthusiasm, Kane did as he was bid. When he looked down for further instructions, Hass said, 'Carve me a rose.'

'This isn't some weird Martian mating ritual thing is it?'

Hass stared impassively at Kane, and then left him to get on with it. By the time Kane had scrambled down again, he was busy threading a

vine through one of the lower limbs of a ghost gum. 'What was that for?' asked Kane as he approached.

Hass tied the vine in place. 'All the plants around you have a meaning,' he said. 'White roses symbolise secrecy. People used to meet in places that hung flowers overhead and their secrets were spoken under white roses. Sub rosa,' said Hass. The term sounded beautiful in his mouth, the sibilants and vowels reminding him of his own language. 'Now that you have marked this place, anything that happens here is sub rosa. We can speak freely.'

'Well, that's a relief...'

'You should not do this thing just because of what happened to your face.' There was a brittle silence.

'When have I even mentioned what happened to me?'

Hass did not blink in the face of Kane's fury. 'You have not,' he said, evenly. 'That is what makes me suspicious.'

Kane's mouth fell open in utter disbelief, and for a moment Hass thought he'd pushed him too far. Then Kane looked away. His breathing began to steady, and when he spoke again his voice was much quieter than Hass expected. 'You remember what happened to the machine,' he said. 'I was watching it so bloody carefully, waiting for it to do something spectacular. I even remember being annoyed when Benny tried to switch it off.' Kane picked up one of the acacias, lifted it from its plastic pot and began kneading away the earth around its roots. 'And then I woke up three days later looking like this.'

'And things were different?'

'Isn't it obvious?' Kane smiled mirthlessly. 'I can't fault Benny, of course. She's said all the things you're supposed to say to a face like mine.'

'You do not believe her?'

'No offence, but I wouldn't be talking to you if I did.'

Hass stared at him. He knew about the scar of course, but it was only now that he realised what it meant. Martians did not appreciate beauty as humans do, but the scar was much bigger than he'd thought, running from Kane's hairline to the left corner of his mouth. For the first time, Kane held his gaze and it was Hass that looked away.

'I figured it out eventually,' said Kane. 'Benny hadn't changed at all. But I had. I began wondering what would've happened if I'd been closer to the explosion. And I began thinking about all the things I was too clever to say to Benny before now...'

Hass nodded. It had taken working with him to really understand Jason Kane. He was essentially a good man, but a creature of the moment. To him, the past and the future simply didn't matter. Like so many good-looking people, the world treated him well in the here and

now, and he liked things just as they stood. In a way, to destroy the way he looked was to destroy his life. Suddenly nothing could be taken for granted any more, not his face, not his lover, not where he was supposed to be in the cosmos. He had to learn how to live all over again, and Hass knew how difficult that could be.

He realised what was missing from the grove.

Kane knelt down to plant the seedling, but Hass took it from his hands. He looked around at everything they'd already planted. This desperation to reconnect with life, this urgency... he knew how to write about that.

He considered the language he would use. Acacias symbolised the future, but it depended on their context. He looked at the colour of the seedling, and knew that in three days time it would be different. Many other things in the grove would change as well, so he would need to root the acacia where it could complement what the other plants would say. Hass closed his eyes. He thought about the rate of growth he'd need to stimulate and the cycle of germination. He thought about what the entire grove would represent by the time Bernice got to see it.

He carefully replanted the acacia, and pulled out his sonic shears. Kane looked at him expectantly, waiting for orders. Hass opened his mouth to describe his inspiration, and found that he could not. The words coming out of his translator couldn't describe what was boiling inside him. For a moment he realised that, try as he might, he was still the outsider here. The awkwardness of the language barrier overwhelmed him, and his translator hissed in frustration.

Kane broke the impasse. He stepped out of Hass's way.

With a nod of gratitude, Hass began his work. Leaves that would obscure the acacia seedlings were trimmed aside. He bundled up the cuttings and tied them together with a piece of brown twine. Making a quick decision about placement, he hung them on the branches of a gum tree on the other side of the grove. He began to consider the best time of day to read what he was writing. They would need to plan how to maximise the impact of the symbolism, what scents could be achieved and how to blend them...

And all the time he was grasping for the feeling, the emotion the plants would represent. He knew how it felt to be frightened, how it felt to yearn for more. Apparently he was not so different from Kane after all.

The night before the perfect day was warm. The planting had been completed a month before. Most of the flowers had bloomed in time, particularly the off-world specimens that thrived in the Collection's atmosphere. Hass looked around with satisfaction. Not far to go now.

Jason was squatting in the far corner of the grove, staring at the ground. As he began to push the grass aside, Hass walked over to see what he had found.

Between Jason's hands were flecks of red amid the green. They were tiny shoots of nysslyr, just beginning to unfurl. Hass tilted his head to one side to regard them.

The shoots seemed to be growing in rows and curves, the tiny plants sketching out the skeleton of something larger. Jason stood up again. 'Is it my imagination, or does that look deliberate?'

Hass looked at Jason. 'It is not your imagination,' he said eventually. 'It is a map.'

'How can you tell?'

'Who else would plant Martian seed in my garden?'

'Sorry, not thinking. But what do you need a map for? Buried treasure?'

'You do not remember?' Kane shook his head. 'The map is... a reminder.'

'So remind me.' Hass remained silent. Kane raised an eyebrow. 'You still don't really trust me do you?'

There was an uncomfortable silence.

Hass looked at Kane warily. 'You remember what you must do tomorrow?'

'I think so. Benny will love this, Hass.'

'I hope so.'

'Are you going to tell me what it all says?'

'No. I have told you enough.'

'I hate you when you're mysterious.'

'That must be very frustrating.'

For a moment neither of them said a word. Hass breathed in the scent of eucalyptus. He knew they had done a good job. The grove did not look exactly as he'd hoped, but that was just one of the things he treasured about the artform.

Plants just didn't grow in straight lines.

He wondered how much of it Bernice would understand. He had coached Kane on what to say, but he was counting on Bernice's knowledge of Martian culture to fill in a lot of the blanks. He would be disappointed if she only saw the surface of what they had done, but he was also scared that she would see too much. There was a lot of him in the grove, certainly a lot more than he had intended. He had always been so careful to give nothing away, and now his feelings festooned the entire grove. That nagging sense that he didn't fit the shape of his life any more was written here in letters forty feet high. Bernice would probably assume that Kane had simply dictated how he felt, and in a way, she'd be right. But would she really miss what now

seemed so obvious? Hass wasn't sure, and for a second he felt incredibly exposed.

'Hass?' said Kane.

'Yes?'

'Do you... do you love Benny?'

Hass did not answer. He gazed at a tree branch, losing himself in the twist of the bark.

'Hass?'

'Why do you ask?'

Kane smiled faintly. 'Everyone else seems to. And it's the quiet ones you have to keep an eye on.'

'Am I really what you are afraid of?'

'You're dodging my question.'

'You're dodging mine too.'

'I just want a straight answer.'

'That must be very frustrating.'

Kane smiled again. Then he took a deep breath. 'Wish me luck,' he said.

'Just do what I told you.'

It would all begin with the rain. Jason would wake Bernice just before dawn. They would get dressed, and Hass had told him to make sure that she did not wear any shoes. By the time Jason put the blindfold on Bernice, the rain would have finished and he could lead her out the door. Bernice would giggle most of the way, but Jason would shush her before they got close to the grove. Hass knew Jason would be worried about getting this right, and Bernice would probably calm down once she realised he was serious.

It would be the scent that would intrigue her. Humans had a better sense of smell than Martians, and Hass had been careful to get the balance exactly right. It wasn't like a perfume; it was too robust for that. A botanist would smell acacia, eucalyptus, nysslyr, and the slightest hint of roses. If it rained, the air would be clear and the scents would remain distinct, like voices harmonising around a tune. The humans' lungs would expand and they would begin to breathe more deeply. Oxygen would flood their systems, bringing them to life. The world around them would sharpen into focus.

There would still be some warmth from the previous night, but beneath their feet the grass would be soft and wet. Droplets would tremble on the tips of leaves, the grey light of dawn making them shine like glass. Jason would lead Bernice through the ferns, holding them apart for her until they reached the grove. The huge pale bodies of the ghost gums would loom overhead. Flowers would hang from the arms of the trees, tangling through the branches in patterns like

jazz. Vines and creepers tied it all together, swaying in the early morning breeze. There would be gentle creaks and whispers from everything around them, the sound of the grove singing in green.

There would be a blanket in the centre of the clearing, and next to that would be a basket. Kane would help Bernice to sit, and then he would open the basket. From inside would come a new scent, a sweet accelerant to counterpoint the rest of the grove. He would pull out a plum and raise it to her lips. She would take a bite, and so would he. Then he would undo the blindfold.

Hass could not predict what the look on Bernice's face would be when she saw the secret world they had made.

But he knew it would be quite something.

Bernice had explained the concept of a godfather for twenty minutes before she remembered to tell Hass she was pregnant. Hass had never felt so awkward, but he could tell Bernice and Jason were too excited to notice.

He hadn't thought Jason had wanted children of his own, but on reflection it made sense. For him to suddenly discover he was to have a child with the woman he loved was a sign that the writing in green had done its work. A new child was confirmation that things could begin again, that life would be different. It also confirmed that it was time for Hass to make a decision.

The writing process had brought everything to a head. His disquiet had grown every night, and he realised that it was only by imagining how it felt to be somebody else that he had dropped his defences. The writing in green was the crowning achievement of his work in the gardens, and now he needed to start again somewhere else. He didn't tell anyone how he felt, didn't want to discuss it. He wrote a letter of resignation, and then threw it away. He wrote another but did not sign it. Placing it on his desk, he regarded it for a long time. It was almost sundown before he set off for the grove.

He did not expect Bernice to be waiting for him, but he hid his surprise as best he could. She watched as he hunkered down to read the nysslyr flowers. 'I know a map when I see one,' she said, finally.

Hass traced the pattern in the grass with his claw. 'I wondered if you would.'

'So you actually buried it? I thought your lot only used them during wars.'

'There is a lot about us that you do not know.' For a moment he worried that he might sound rude, but as he stood up again Bernice took his arm. He could not feel her touch through his cold-suit, but it didn't seem to matter. 'You will recall...'

Hass stopped, wanting to make sure he found the right words. 'I did

not adjust to the Collection... easily.'

'You're not still worrying about that?'

Hass looked around at the writing in green. 'You would not be here if you could not see how I feel.'

Bernice looked at him guiltily. Hass smiled at her and gently let her arm go.

Glancing one last time at the map, he carefully measured out a series of steps and checked for landmarks. He remembered how the trees had looked, the grass, the flowers. He remembered digging up the war-torn soil. Turning slowly to be sure of his position, he marvelled at the changes he had wrought since then. Finally, he knelt down and spoke to the earth.

'Can you tell me a story?'

Seconds ticked by.

And then a voice replied. Hass began to dig.

Bernice walked over to stand beside him. 'It can speak?' she asked.

'It is a time capsule,' Hass replied. 'What else would it do?'

'I was imagining something more mundane.'

'Without a voice the capsule would be useless. Usually it is only family who contribute, but my family would never let me use their voices for something this frivolous. So I used... other people. The more you seal inside, the better the results.'

'Is mine in there?'

'Of course.'

'Anyone else?'

'Everyone.'

'Jason? Brax?'

'Everyone.'

'It sounds like it's pretty crowded.'

'That's why it works,' said Hass. 'The voices become more than the sum of their parts. They begin to speak as one.'

'And why is it worth listening to?'

Hass looked up from his digging. 'Have you ever made plans for what you will achieve? Ever written down your hopes and fears? And have you ever looked back at those plans and realised that you are not where you are supposed to be?' Bernice stared into Hass's eyes. Hass was sure that she was going to ask him something he wouldn't know how to answer. But she did not. 'That is what the capsule is for. It tells you a story of how your war is progressing. It tells you where you should be.'

Bernice looked up carefully at the huge figure of the Martian. 'We're going to lose you, aren't we?' she whispered.

'I feel things are different. Not right. Since the explosion...'

'You've felt it too?'

Hass looked down and started digging again. It wasn't long before he unearthed the capsule. He placed it on the grass and then lifted himself out of the hole he had made.

He saw Bernice cry a little as the capsule told him its story. Its voice usually sounded like a chorus, but occasionally he could recognise individuals. He wondered if that was what was upsetting her: Braxiatel still sounding fine; Adrian and Bev with not a care in the world; Jason before his accident...

The conversation did not last as long he had thought it would. When it was over he thanked the capsule and placed it back beneath the ground. He made his peace with the garden, and said goodbye.

He told Bernice that he could not be a godfather, and Bernice was smart enough to know she could not dissuade him.

She stayed close to him as they left the grove, and watched without expression as he signed his letter of resignation. She insisted, however, on helping him to pack. It did not take long, but while it lasted she asked him questions about writing in green. He asked her why she was so interested and she replied that she was choosing names for the baby. She wanted a name that would symbolise the future, a name for a girl.

Hass thought for a moment, and then he said —

‘Stop.’

The first voice was quiet, but the story halted instantly. After a time, the second voice spoke again, careful to be as gentle as it could.

‘Why did you do that?’

‘That was the end of the story.’

‘How could you tell?’

‘Experience.’

There was another long silence before the second voice spoke again. ‘I have heard your voice before,’ it said.

‘That is hardly surprising. It is the same as yours.’

‘Who are you?’ There was another long silence. ‘... Hass?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why do I have your voice?’

‘Is that the only one you have?’

There was the faraway sound of babble, all voices and no words. ‘No,’ said the second voice wonderingly. ‘There are others here as well. Other stories. Other memories.’

‘Do you recognise them?’

‘I... Bernice. Braxiatel. Kane. Many others... all talking about the future...’

‘Yes. Everyone.’

Fear entered the second voice. ‘Tell me what this means.’

'Isn't it obvious?'

There was a pregnant pause. 'I am the time capsule,' said the second voice.

'Yes,' said Hass. 'You are.'

'How long have I been buried?'

'I cannot tell. You were only born tonight. But you should not have been born at all.'

'What do you mean?' The capsule imagined Hass's cold eyes staring off into the distance. It heard the sound of something biting into the earth above, the sound of digging. Fear returned as it wondered what Hass was going to do.

'You are a self-contained bubble of time,' said Hass eventually. 'Full of voices locked in stasis. Locked outside time itself.'

'To keep them safe,' said the capsule carefully. 'To tell you the story.'

'Your story is not for me.' For a moment there was only the sound of digging. 'Something... has *changed*. You have told me what I believe should have happened, but that is not what is. The story here is different.'

'Do you have any proof of this change?'

'I am talking to it.'

'Are things so different?'

'Different enough.' The sound of digging was getting very close now. 'Kane and Bernice are still together. Kane's face is as you said. But he has never asked me about writing in green.'

'And the little girl? Did you name it?'

'There is no little girl.'

There was a stark silence.

'And you, Hass?' asked the capsule. 'How are you different?'

'I belong here,' said Hass simply. 'This garden is where I am meant to be. I recognise the people in your story, the ones that should have been. I care about what happened to them. I even love them, in a way. But their story is not mine.'

The sound of digging stopped, and moonlight fell onto the capsule's skin. It was lifted into the air, and Hass brushed away the dirt on its surface. 'I thought Bernice would be with you,' said the capsule.

'No,' said Hass. 'Not this time.'

'So the people who never happened... they are our secret,' said the capsule. 'Sub rosa.'

'Sub rosa,' agreed Hass.

The capsule felt its body twist. Its skin broke apart and the knot of time inside it came undone. From far away came the sound of something laughing. Voices bubbled up like oxygen and then fell silent. The story they had told was over.

Hass laid the dead capsule on the grass. He turned to the map of flowers on the edge of the grove and levelled the sonic shears at them. The flowers flew apart and the ground writhed. When the map had disappeared, Hass knelt before the broken earth. Carefully he began to scatter poppy seeds in a new pattern. When he was finished he covered the seeds with dirt and raked the surface with his claws.

It was not easy for him to climb, and it took him several minutes to reach the top of the ghost gum tree. A brief examination confirmed that there was no rose carved in the bark. He knew there would not be — he knew his garden. He carved his own.

He crouched quietly amid the leaves, looking out over the garden. He fancied that he could hear the poppies begin to grow, the memorial for a child that had never been. In a strange way, she was Hass's child, the one that would never have been conceived without him. Kane was her father and Bernice was her mother, but Hass was her godfather. It was he that remembered her now when no one else could. It was he that had chosen her secret name.

The name below him, written in green.

Acacia.

Showing Initiative

By David Cromarty

Jason Kane was not what I expected.

Obviously, I had heard a little about the Braxiatel Collection, and I had an idea about the kind of people who worked there. I expected a certain amount of eccentricity amongst the staff. What I hadn't expected was an unshaven, scruffily dressed man who looked like he'd just picked a fight with some very large Killorans.

As he stood to address us, a pained look crossed his face. 'Ladies, gentlemen, and others, I don't need to tell you what it means to work here. I don't need to tell you about our reputation, or the number of applications we receive every year.' His words seemed flat and hollow, as if he was uncomfortable in front of the crowd. 'A lot has changed, lately. As some of you may be aware, our founder has decided to... take a less hands-on role, leaving the day-to-day running of the place to his staff. As a result of this, a small number of positions have opened up.' I looked around. There were certainly a lot of us competing for this small number of positions.

The next morning, I reported to Mr Kane's office as instructed. I knocked on the door timidly, my other hand hidden in my trouser pocket as I shifted my weight from foot to foot. A muffled voice came from the other side of the door, almost inaudible. It may have been someone telling me to come in, or telling me to sod off. I waited until it had been repeated twice before I risked it, slowly pushing the door open.

Jason Kane waved a hand at me, not even looking round. A folder full of papers hung out of his mouth. His hands held yet more papers, and he stood behind a desk which held a small forest's worth of paperwork, as well as the more modern datapads that I was used to. Some of which seemed to be perched very precariously. The scars on Mr Kane's face seemed much worse close up, particularly one which ran down the left side of his face, next to his eye. I was no expert, but it looked to me like he was lucky to still have it. He waved me inside, mumbling, 'Come in, come in,' but with the file hanging out of his mouth I wasn't sure if he was being welcoming or impatient. He looked around himself for a while, then shrugged, and dropped the various files and folders to the desk, where they somehow managed to land without sending anything else tumbling to the floor.

'You must be...' He immediately turned to examine a nearby file, and I sat, patiently waiting for him to finish. Eventually, he grabbed a

sheet of paper and frowned at it.

‘Let’s see...’ he said, reading. ‘Clip Geepee?’ I shook my head. His eyes went back to the paperwork. ‘He’ter D’neth?’ (I mimed ‘no’.) ‘Aska Lollo?’ Suddenly, he looked up at me, his eyes wide.

‘You’re not the Emperor Salubrious of Pantak 6?’

‘No.’ It was not the right answer.

‘Oh,’ he said quietly. ‘Shame.’

‘Stevens, sir. Paul Stevens.’ Instantly I wondered why I had addressed him as sir. I must have sounded like a child, rather than the young but undeniably gifted student I wanted him to believe me.

‘Right! Stevens, there you are!’ He waved the sheet of paper in front of me, but as I looked for my name on it, he slammed it back down on the desk and covered it up. ‘Yeah, we’ve got a lot of students coming to us at the moment.’

A silence developed, which I quickly felt the urge to fill. ‘I was told that I applied at just the right time. Apparently, the Collection can use all the help it can get at the moment.’

‘I wouldn’t say that. We’ve got a pretty smooth operation running here.’ He gestured around the room as if to prove his point, knocking a stack of papers flying as he did so. He lunged after them, managing to catch some, but screwing others up in the process. I hoped that they weren’t anything important — a hope that Jason shared, if the uncertain expression on his face was anything to go by.

Jason filled me in on my duties — basic filing, cataloguing, and other tasks that were too tedious for the regular staff. He told me to report to the main library the next day. I then returned to the room I had been allocated to unpack my belongings and write a few letters home.

The next few days were spent going over the library’s records, making sure everything was in the right place, tracking down items that weren’t in the right place, and making a note of anything that seemed to be missing altogether.

Exciting stuff. There were a large number of items which had been misfiled, something which I was assured was ‘most unusual’ by the Collection’s regular librarians. Unusual or not, it meant I was kept busy. While there was a great deal to do, I didn’t find it especially taxing — except on my patience — and I was doing just fine until, one day, Jason Kane decided to pay me a visit. If he had seemed flustered on our first meeting, he was almost hysterical on our second.

‘Paul! There you are! Good!’ he exclaimed loudly as he burst into the room I was working in. He composed himself before asking, ‘I wonder if I could have a moment of your time?’

I followed him back to the office in which we had first met. Once we arrived, he instructed me to sit down, though he chose to pace

around the small office. It was slightly more orderly than when I had last seen it. Jason seemed to be catching up on the backlog of paperwork that had been threatening to engulf him, though it would still be a considerable time before he cleared the desk. As I was taking this in, it took me a while to realise that Jason had stopped speaking. I turned to him, assuming he was waiting for my full attention. But by the look on his face, he seemed to be trying to put off whatever he had to say. 'You're probably wondering why I brought you here.'

'Well, yes,' I replied uncertainly. 'Is there a problem with my work?'

'No, not at all. I'm told you've been doing an excellent job. You work hard, you use your initiative. Apparently your social skills leave a little to be desired, but...' I'm guessing he stopped talking because he saw my face fall at this comment. 'Anyway, that's not why we're here.' He continued, quickly. 'No doubt you'll have noticed that there have been more than a couple of items in the library which have been...' He stopped, seemingly searching for the right word. 'Misplaced.'

'Yes. The librarians said that things haven't been running very smoothly of late.'

Jason looked taken aback at that, as if the comment offended him. Yet he couldn't find the words to argue, so seemed to accept that there was some truth in what I'd said. 'Yes, anyway... it's not just the library that has had this problem. Apparently, there are a number — quite a large number actually — of other artefacts that have been...' He paused again.

'Misplaced?' I suggested. Jason winced sheepishly, making me wonder if I was coming across as overly critical. I wanted to make a good impression, after all.

'Yes. Misplaced. As I'm sure you're aware, the Collection houses a number of valuable items. Items that a lot of people would like to get their hands on. Either because they're rare, unusually beautiful, or... dangerous.' He said the last word under his breath, as if he'd rather not have to say it. 'Obviously, we want any such items found as soon as possible, because they are so...'

'Dangerous?' I interrupted.

'Valuable,' Jason finished. 'I'd like you to join the team that's working on this. You'll be working under Bev Tarrant. I don't suppose you've met her yet.' I shook my head. 'Well, I'm sure you'll get on fine. Just remember she's in charge. She doesn't like people forgetting that.' He seemed to be speaking from experience.

Bev Tarrant turned out to be only slightly less intimidating than I had anticipated, but she pretty much left me to get on with my job. I was working in one section of the Archaeology Department of the

Collection, which housed a large number of ancient (and probably priceless) relics, and at that moment the majority of them weren't where they should be. Presumably this was why they left me to my own devices — if every department was like this, no one would have had the time to check up on me. On top of that, the department had apparently lost an important member of staff recently. Bernard somebody, or something.

I set about organising what was there, comparing it to the inventory I had been given of what should be there. Half the stuff I found should have been stored in an entirely different section, and I began to wonder if this had been done deliberately — the Braxiatel Collection's reputation was famous, and I struggled to reconcile it with the total lack of organisation in front of me.

I returned all the items to their correct department — each time being greeted with further things that should have been in my section. By the time I finished, I had only one item unaccounted for. Of course, I dreaded delivering the bad news to Bev, but I thought it should be done as soon as possible. As it turned out, she took the news rather well.

'You've been working well, Stevens. A lot of people have good things to say about you,' she began. She leaned in close to me before continuing. 'But if we don't find that missing artefact, recommendations will be the last thing on your mind.'

Horried to find that my job was at risk, I returned to my work area to collect my tools, various barely connected thoughts running through my head. Why was Bev overreacting so greatly? And how had this department become so disorganised? I'd often been accused of having an overactive imagination, and it was working overtime right now.

The missing item was a statue from some ancient civilisation I've never heard of, despite my knowledge of ancient civilisations in this sector being pretty impressive. Apparently, this statue was reputed to have the power to destroy a world. Not so unusual, Jason said. The Braxiatel Collection had whole buildings of similar stuff.

I remembered thinking earlier that there seemed to be something deliberate about the misfiling of certain artefacts. Was this some kind of test? Jason had said that people had been impressed with my work. Who knew, if I impressed them enough, there might even be the possibility of a permanent place on the Collection.

I bent down to gather up my things when I noticed something was different. No, everything was different. All the furniture had been moved around, even though it was fixed to the floor. On top of that, the room was an entirely different shape, and at the far end of it there was a door which hadn't been there before.

At this point I thought I should go and get Jason or, if she had calmed down a little, Bev. But the idea of running to Bev and telling her that the building was changing shape was not appealing. I thought of all the other students who were here, competing for the same few positions. If I could solve this mystery on my own...

Hesitantly, I pushed the door open and stepped through.

I was rather taken aback when I stepped through into what seemed to be an underground tunnel. Whether it was natural or man-made I had no idea, but it was only about five feet high, forcing me to stoop as I made my way through. After a couple of hundred metres or so, it opened into a wide cavern which I suspected wasn't natural, though I couldn't be sure. The roof of the cavern opened up slightly, and I was glad to be able to stand up straight.

There was a circular indentation in the far wall, and inside it was the missing statue, surrounded by some kind of circuitry I hadn't seen before. The statue which seemed rather ugly, now that I could examine it — was of a man, screaming in pain, with what looked like snakes coming out of his mouth. The man's eyes glowed an unpleasant shade of green. There seemed to be some kind of aura about it — a slight vibration in the air which didn't bode well. I pulled at the statue, gently at first. When that didn't work, I pulled harder, but it still took three or four solid tugs before it eventually came free. When it did, a thin wire was revealed, running from the back of the statue and disappearing inside the wall. I gave the wire a sharp tug, and the vibration ceased as the glowing green eyes slowly faded to black.

I placed the artefact on Bev's desk, feeling quite proud. Although I felt I had a right to, I suppressed the urge to grin quite as widely as I wanted to. Bev seemed relieved rather than impressed. She called Jason in to join us, and I told them how I had found it.

'Well,' Jason said when I had finished. 'I have to say you did well. Considering the dangerous nature of the artefact, it was very brave of you to act as you did.'

Bev, on the other hand, seemed unimpressed. 'Although I'm not certain that going off on your own like that was the best course of action. You could have been hurt.'

'Yes, well, normally I wouldn't.' I hesitated, but decided honesty was the best policy. 'You see, I figured it out. I knew it was a test. It's possibly a bit of an odd way of doing things, but... I mean, this is the Braxiatel Collection. You'd never lose such a valuable item, even if it can't actually do anything. The very idea is ridiculous. I guess I cheated a little — I knew there was no real danger.'

Bev looked about to speak, but Jason cut in. 'Oh, dear, you've rumbled us. Well done! I guess we can't pull the wool over your eyes!

Now, if you'd like to return to your quarters, Miss Tarrant and I will just review your... test results.' I hesitated, a little angry at being dismissed like that. I guessed that I'd annoyed him by seeing through the whole thing.

Nonetheless, as I rose from my seat and walked out the room, I had an uncanny feeling that I was going to enjoy life on the Braxiatel Collection.

Bev waited until Paul had left the room before speaking. Jason had a feeling he knew what was coming.

'What the hell was that about?'

'Well, you know, the kid has a point — we shouldn't have lost this thing.' He looked at the artefact distastefully. *'Even if it is disgusting.'* Bev was staring at him.

'So we let Paul think he just passed some kind of bizarre initiative test rather than saving this entire planetoid from destruction?' Bev seemed less than thrilled with the idea.

'I think that's best, don't you? After all, you heard the kid; the whole story is utterly ridiculous.' Jason couldn't help smiling. *'The true ones usually are...'*

A Murderous Desire

By Ian Farrington

It took a second or two for her eyes to grow accustomed to the light — and, as her sight returned, she became aware that her whole body was tense. Letting her hands fall away from her face, Bernice saw the crowd of onlookers. They were agog, all misty-eyed and open-mouthed. She turned to follow their gaze, and saw the history machine. The white blur on the screen was evolving, morphing into recognisable shapes and patterns.

Doggles stood, proud and unfazed, next to his machine.

‘The beginning of it all...’ he announced.

Bernice focused on the screen. On it, gases rushed past at uncontrollable speeds, instant explosions rocking the image. It was beautiful: she could *feel* the pull of gravity, the *force* of what she was seeing.

‘The Big Bang,’ said Doggles. ‘And that’s only the start!’ He was calling out to everyone now, his voice strong and clear. ‘With this machine I can focus on any event in history and actually see it. This will revolutionise our understanding of our very existence.’

Bernice watched as Doggles expertly flicked switches and punched buttons. The screen switched to an image of a man in a toga giving a speech, then a large boat sinking in icy waters, then a red-shirted sports team celebrating a victory.

‘History at our fingertips!’ said Doggles.

The screen continued to change every few seconds like an old-fashioned television set lurching through the channels: a man in a spacesuit on the surface of a barren moon, jubilant people knocking a wall down, humans and Martians signing a peace treaty.

Bernice knew immediately what this meant.

‘Mr Doggles! Mr Doggles!’ The journalists in the crowd were now pushing towards the Cahlian, Brax’s few security men doing their best to hold them back.

Doggles stepped forward, obviously enjoying his 15 seconds of fame. ‘Now, now, ladies and gentlemen, what can I do for you? Any questions?’ Everyone shouted at the same time — but above the hubbub, one persistent journalist could be heard.

‘Mr Doggles! Bryson Poul, Stratus News! Can you tell us about the development of your machine? Where did it come from?’

Doggles laughed. ‘Well,’ he said. ‘I’m not going to divulge information that may be — how can I put it? — commercially

sensitive. The history machine represents a breakthrough in the development of society like we've not seen since the discovery of the wheel —'

'Can you show us that?' shouted Parasiel from the back of the crowd. Everyone laughed. Everyone's eyes were on Doggles, their faces smiling in amazement. They were like disciples at the feet of a messiah.

'All in good time,' Doggles called back. 'Any more questions?'

'How will the machine affect the work being done here at the Braxiatel Collection?' came a shout from inside the throng.

'Er,' said Bernice, cutting Doggles off before he could speak. 'Time will tell, I suspect.'

'Professor Summerfield,' said Doggles to the mass of people, 'has yet to be convinced, it seems.'

She knew she shouldn't get involved, that he was baiting her. 'Oh, well. No, far be it from me to question you. I'm sure your history machine will be a roaring success. It's completely indicative of what people really want, isn't it? We've all had enough of thorough research and justified reasoning and the processes of learning and studying and understanding. It's about time we were all spoon-fed and given all the answers to life, the universe and every-bloody-thing, all at the touch of a button.'

'A little cynical, perhaps?' asked Doggles.

'And so she might well be.' Everyone turned around to see Irving Braxiatel, standing imperiously a few metres away, arms behind his back. Bev Tarrant was next to him, looking as shifty as ever. 'Mr Doggles, your wonderful machine has many glorious benefits, of that I have no doubt. But even you can surely see the implications...'

Doggles turned expectantly to the journalists and students. 'Yes, well, any more questions?' Immediately, a white noise of voices began from the audience.

Bernice watched as Braxiatel and Bev moved past the crowd and ducked under the linked arms of two of the security men. Braxiatel took a nervous look at the history machine, then walked over to join Bernice. 'You felt it too, I assume,' he whispered to her.

'Felt...?' she asked.

'Oh, come on, Bernice. I know you better than that.' He flashed her his most charming smile. Bernice knew what it meant: don't try to say otherwise, it won't work; I know everything.

Bernice looked across at Doggles. 'He's loving it, isn't he? The adulation. The fame.'

'Wouldn't you?' said Bev.

Bernice raised her voice, allowing at least the people at the front of the crowd to hear her. 'Well, I wouldn't parade something like that

machine around in public. It's irresponsible. He needs locking up. It's not a —' She stopped, noticing that Braxiatel wasn't paying attention to what she was saying. He was looking across at Doggles. The Cahlian was more full of energy than Bernice had ever seen him. His posture had grown more confident, his eyes more alert. He was fielding questions from the crowd — more students than journalists, Bernice now spotted — with charisma and charm. His public loved him. It made her want to vomit.

She could also see pads of paper and pens being shoved forward towards him.

Half-drowned-out cries could also be heard:

'... autograph...'

'... have a picture...'

'... my place...'

'... sign this...'

'... Doggles, I love you...'

'Oh, for pity's sake...' whispered Bernice.

Braxiatel walked over to Doggles and placed an authoritative hand on his shoulder. 'This way, Mr Doggles.'

'But... but... the public!'

'Yes, well, you can see them another time. Less is more — that's the first rule of propaganda. Leave them begging.'

Bernice and Bev followed as Braxiatel led the Cahlian past a cordon of his security men and into the Mansionhouse. The sound of the baying crowd was muffled, but still audible. There was a coffee machine just inside. Bernice took a paper cup from the dispenser: her whole body was screaming out for caffeine.

'You've caused quite a stir, Mr Doggles,' said Braxiatel. 'If I wasn't so concerned, I'd be impressed.'

Doggles was smirking.

'Think it's a joke, do we?' Bernice asked, sipping her coffee.

'Oh, come on, Professor,' said Doggles. 'You've had a certain notoriety in your time. Don't tell me you didn't enjoy it.'

'The difference is that any "notoriety" I gained was due to real work, real progress. Not some trumped-up gizmo with no basis in fact.'

'There's nothing trumped-up about this machine! Far from it.'

'Now, now, children,' said Braxiatel, stepping in between them. He turned to Doggles. 'I think, just until things calm down, we had best move you to secure quarters.'

Extract from Professor Bernice Summerfield's Diary

People are, of course, talking about little else. Is history over? What secrets can we solve? The Collection's not been this excitable since we

booted out the Axis. Anything's an excuse for a party here, but this is something else.

Having spent the whole afternoon and some of the evening worrying about it, I decided to go and see Doggles. I just had to reason with him, find out what his intentions were. I knew where he was being kept: one of Brax's hideaways, a small room in a discreet building a distance from the main centre of the Collection. Braxiatel had put two of his more trustworthy security guards on the door to the room.

'I'm sorry, love,' said one as I approached. 'Mr Doggles is not to have visitors.' How sweet. He didn't know who I was. That doesn't happen to me. So I explained, and with only a little swearing was able to charm my way inside. 'Hello?' I asked. 'Is there anybody in there?'

Doggles was sat in only his underpants (unflattering, stained), on a small foldout bed, reading something full of graphs and equations. I was horrified by his skin, horribly scarred all over, like he'd been stapled together from scraps. No wonder he could be a bit difficult. Note to self: find out what happened to him, who did this.

'Come to make more wisecracks?' he asked.

'You've just unveiled a machine that will change the very nature of society,' I said. 'No doubt making you seriously rich in the process. I wouldn't have thought my sarcasm would mean much to you.'

'I didn't mean to cause a panic, you know?' He seemed to mean it. 'I just wanted people to know what the machine was capable of.' He sighed. 'What have I done?' he added, under his breath.

I sat down next to him. 'You said, "This isn't what's meant to happen." When the machine began to work. What did you mean?'

'I don't... I don't remember saying that.' He obviously did. He shifted uncomfortably, all guilty schoolboy. 'Why did you want to see me?'

'I just thought we should talk,' I said. 'Your machine — if it's genuine —'

'It's genuine,' he interrupted. 'You saw for yourself.'

'You could have rigged that up! The images you chose were seemingly random — when someone asked you to show them something specific, you laughed it off.'

He paused, looking down at his feet. 'You were saying.' The showmanship had all gone now, he talked like he was resigned to 'being found out'.

'If the machine can do what you claim, there're going to be some pretty damn big implications.'

'Do you think I don't know that?' He stood up, moving away from me. 'Professor... I know you don't like me.' Ironically, I was actually starting to warm to him: it was clear he'd realised how far he'd gone.

‘But don’t you see what’s going on? The machine allows us — historians and archaeologists like ourselves to know for certain what the past was like. No more digging around in muddy fields, no more trawling through dusty libraries. We can focus on any point in history, any event that ever took place, and witness what happened. Can’t you see why that’s important?’

‘I can see... certain advantages,’ I admitted. (What I was actually thinking was, ‘Does that mean you can use this machine to spy on people in the shower?’ He seems like one of those guys who mentally undresses you. Maybe he’s already looked me up on his machine... I didn’t think Doggles would react well to that, so I kept the thought to myself.) ‘It is an impressive machine. I can’t deny that. But you’re working on huge assumptions. The scientific community — real scientists and historians — needs proof. You can’t just present a fait accompli without justifying it, without allowing it to be scrutinised. This isn’t a freak show in a circus!’

‘I know, I know, I know...’ he said, sitting back down.

‘If what you’re claiming is true, then... we’ll have to deal with it. But, as you saw at your little show, your machine’s generating a lot of interest. And they won’t all be pushy journalists and wet-behind-the-ears students. Big corporations will make you offers; scientists will attack you through sheer jealousy.’

He looked me in the eye. I could see that he was listening. ‘Maybe you’re right.’ He smiled.

‘I’m not saying that what you’re doing is evil or anything. Maybe I’d have been as excited and, shall we say, cavalier if I had a machine like that. But these things need to be considered. Carefully.’

I put my hand on his shoulder. It just seemed like the right thing to do. Funny, he’d had rock-star adulation earlier at the press conference, and here he was looking like a little lost boy, in need of someone just to tell him it would all be okay.

He put his hand on my knee. This, dear diary, has happened before. I’m a good-looking woman. Most of the time. I usually brush the advance aside with a sarcastic barb (‘I’d rather chew my own tongue off,’ that sort of thing) or a quick bit of violence (that guy on Oultram XII must still have the pencil mark on the back of his hand)... but, today, with Doggles... I don’t know... I just didn’t move. I don’t fancy him, as such — he is rather repellent in most areas — but, against my better judgement, I felt for him. He’s in over his head; he doesn’t know what he’s got himself into. I can understand that.

There was a moment. A pause. A connection, maybe. I became aware he was only wearing his pants.

‘Yes, well,’ I said, taking my hand away. ‘I’m glad we had this little talk.’

‘So am I, Professor.’

‘You’re okay, then?’

‘I will be.’

‘Good.’ I stood up, perhaps a tad too quickly. ‘Well, I must get going. I’m seeing Jason later. That’s my partner. We’re picking Peter up from his playgroup. That’s my son. Peter. And Jason.’

Doggles was looking at me serenely, coyly, smitten even. Hell, what have I done now? Bernice Summerfield, you’re too old to get all girly and maternal like this over some geek with no social skills. Stop it at once.

‘Benny?’ She wasn’t answering, so now Jason was banging on the door. ‘Are you there?’

From inside, he heard a noise. Something being knocked over. He was about to call out again when he heard Bernice swear. He didn’t have time to be subtle: he used his key and opened up.

There she was, her face covered in some buttery muck, a towel not quite fitting all the way round her.

‘Jason,’ she said. ‘You’re a bit early.’

He ran to her, grabbing her arms and nearly costing her the towel. ‘You’re all right? Tell me you’re all right!’

‘No, I’m not all right,’ she snapped. ‘It’s been a very long day and you’ve just ruined my bath. What do you want?’

He stepped back from her, checking all round. On instinct, he closed the door.

‘What is it?’ asked Bernice. ‘Come on, I can tell you’re spooked.’

‘Well, I’ve got some good news and some bad news.’ He swallowed.

‘Okay,’ said Bernice. ‘Let’s get the bad news out of the way.’

‘Doggles is dead.’

Bernice stepped back, hand to her mouth. ‘No. He can’t be. I only saw him a couple of hours ago.’

‘Yeah, well...’ stumbled Jason. ‘I’ve been sent to get you.’

‘We should be out looking for a killer...’

‘Um, yeah,’ said Jason. ‘Actually, Benny, it seems you were the last person to see him alive, and...’

‘What? I’m a murder suspect?’

‘No, no, no,’ said Jason, trying to sound nonchalant. ‘Well, kind of. It doesn’t look good.’

‘Brilliant. So, what’s the good news?’

Jason took Bernice’s hand and kissed her on the forehead. ‘The good news is that you’ve got your friends to help you out.’

She looked at him coolly. ‘No, really, Jason, what’s the good news?’

‘I’m sorry, Bernice,’ said Braxiatel. ‘We must be thorough. Doggles seems to have had friends in high places, and we’ve got Interplanetary

Police on their way. I'd like this sorted out before they get here, if only as a matter of pride.'

Jason looked across at Bernice. She was clearly nervous — who wouldn't be? Her friends were all but accusing her of murder. Jason didn't trust Braxiatel, but his authority was needed if Bernice was going to be in the clear.

'What has Jason told you?' he said.

'That Doggles is dead,' she replied.

'Indeed, a sorry state of affairs. I regret it was I who found his body. We had gone to see Mr Doggles about how to handle his new-found fame and... Well, it wasn't pretty, Bernice. There was blood everywhere.' Braxiatel sat down behind his desk. 'Tell us about your visit,' he said slowly.

'You don't really suspect me, do you? Look, we shouldn't be wasting time with this. Who stands to gain from Doggles's death? I mean, what would that achieve? I suppose anyone who had a secret to keep because the history machine —' Her eyes widened in amazement. 'That's it! We can see who it was on the history machine!'

Braxiatel folded his arms.

'Okay, what?' said Bernice.

'The history machine got smashed too,' said Jason.

'What?' said Bernice.

'Yeah, we can't see what they did to it, but it's not working. We only get random static.'

'Oh,' said Bernice. 'Well, nothing worthwhile is ever easy.'

'Tell us about your visit to Doggles,' said Braxiatel again.

Bernice let out a breath. 'I couldn't stop thinking about what Doggles had said, and I had too many questions...'

'You were on your own?' Braxiatel asked.

'Well, yeah. Jason knows to keep out of my way when I'm working. And it was Adrian's night to look after Peter.'

'Where was Joseph?' asked Jason. The little, floating computer was usually hanging around somewhere.

'He wasn't activated.'

'That doesn't sound very likely,' remarked Bev Tarrant. Jason almost fell off his chair in surprise. He hadn't realised she was in the room at all, lurking about in the shadows. Probably a hangover from her thieving days.

'What is she doing here, anyway?' said Bernice, craning her neck round to see her. 'And, while we're at it, where were you last night? Eh? If you're going to be casting assertions, madam, you better be sure your alibi comes up to scratch.'

For a moment, Jason thought Bev actually looked sheepish. 'Adrian can vouch for me,' she said, quickly glancing at Braxiatel.

‘I knew it!’ laughed Bernice. ‘You and Adrian *are* doing the dirty!’
Bev snarled, but before she could respond, Braxiatel cleared his throat.

‘Bernice,’ he said sharply. ‘This is serious. Continue with your story...’

‘I just felt the need to talk to him,’ she said sulkily. ‘Doggles pissed me off, okay? We talked. And we sorted it out, and I left.’

‘You didn’t argue?’ asked Braxiatel.

‘We parted on good terms.’

Braxiatel looked across at Jason before turning back to Bernice. ‘Bernice, the guards posted outside the door claim they heard raised voices. Yours and Doggles’s. They said they heard a fight.’

For the first time, Jason saw real fear in Bernice’s eyes. He knew she was innocent, of course he did, but if he’d wanted proof, this was it. She pulled the same face when fighting monsters — it meant something along the lines of ‘this injustice will not stand’...

‘I’m not suggesting anything untoward, you understand,’ said Braxiatel. ‘But I need to know the truth.’

Bernice dropped her head. ‘We did argue — he was being so stubborn. But it didn’t last and we calmed down.’ She glanced at Jason, and he thought she might even be about to cry. ‘If you must know,’ she said. ‘He came on to me. I didn’t want to say anything, but... oh, this is all so stupid!’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Jason, taking her hand. ‘We’ll get to the bottom of this.’

Extract from Professor Bernice Summerfield’s Diary

Right, I thought when I left Brax’s office, this is serious. No more falling around, no more Bernice Surprise Summerfield making quick quips and jollying it all along. Plan of action: find proof that I didn’t have anything to do with Doggles’s death, clear my name.

I’d thought that Braxiatel was going to lock me up. That’s what he’d done to Doggles, after the press conference. I suppose that was for his own safety — what good it did him. But, no, I’m allowed to roam free... for now. I’ve got to admit it looks damning. I was seen by two security guards going into Doggles’s room; they heard us rowing; I was seen leaving; the next time someone went in, he was dead.

But why would I want to kill Doggles? I didn’t agree with him, but, let’s face it, there’s lots of people I don’t agree with. No: who would want to kill him? And who would gain from me being blamed? Perhaps he was killed simply to frame me?

And how the hell am I going to get out of this one?

Jason was good. He knew how upset I was — damn him for knowing me so well. He said he’d look after Peter, make sure he didn’t find out what was going on. ‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘Nryn’ll look after

him. I think she owes us a favour or two.'

I came home for a bit of peace. Time to think. No sooner had I arrived than the buzzer went. It was Adrian.

'Benny...' he said. 'Jason's just told me. Are you all right?'

'Well, you know...' was all I could manage. He gave me a hug, a bit awkwardly but it was appreciated. We sat down and made small talk. When did I find out? How's Braxiatel handling it? Had I seen Peter?

After a few minutes, he sensed that I didn't want to dwell on it. I'd had enough of friends questioning me from Braxiatel. He made me a hot drink, told me about the construction meeting that had kept him busy all afternoon —

'Hang on,' I said. 'All afternoon? When was the last time you saw Bev?'

'I had lunch with her.'

She lied to me.

'She's been busy,' he said. 'I know this is difficult for you, Bev and me... seeing each other. And this isn't exactly the time to get into it, but you're just going to have accept —'

'Where's she been this afternoon, then?'

'I don't know, Benny. We're not married, you know?'

I apologised — he was right, this wasn't the time to get into domestic issues with Bev and Adrian. I assured him that I'd be all right, but that I needed time on my own. He still lingered.

'I might try to get some sleep,' I said. He believed me, I think, and, kissing me affectionately, he left.

Sleep? I couldn't even if I tried.

She'd lied — barefacedly, in front of Braxiatel and Jason.

'Adrian can vouch for me.' That's what she'd said.

But Bev can't have killed Doggles, surely? Why would she? 'Adrian can vouch for me.' Was she just winding me up, trying to rattle me about her and Adrian's relationship? I've got to find out for sure.

* * *

Bernice finished her diary entry. It struck her as ironic: a son, two ex-lovers (sort of), other friends, yet it was only herself she felt comfortable confiding in. At least she knew what she was thinking.

Bev dominated her mind as she walked through the streets towards the former thief's residence. They hadn't been getting on recently, it was true. Was Bernice jealous of her association with Braxiatel? They *were* getting quite chummy. And with all the Martian negotiations he'd not had the time to speak with Bernice much lately. Mars was a speciality of Bernice's — why was he deliberately cutting her out? Come to think of it, he'd only found the time to speak with her about Wolsey dying because he wanted something from her.

It was Braxiatel who had got her to look after Doggles in the first

place. Was he implicated? He had been as concerned as anyone when the history machine was a success. And Bev had been with him — why?

Bev wasn't home. Quelle surprise. Bernice had wanted just to talk to her — see her reactions to questions. Bev was a good liar, Bernice had no doubt about that, but they'd spent time around each other. They'd been in scrapes together: Bernice had seen her work, seen how she operated. And she was good at reading people.

But it would have to wait.

She walked over to the gardens. To the greenhouse. To Wolsey's grave. She sat down, legs crossed, a few feet away from the freshly filled-in plot.

Bollocks, she thought, this is interminable. She just wanted an end to the indecision, for Doggles's killer to be unmasked, and it all just to be out of the way. Whoever they may be.

'A penny for them?'

She looked up to see Hass.

'That is correct, I take it? I confess I do not know what a penny is.'

'It's an old form of currency,' said Bernice. 'Believe me, you'd need several million of them for my thoughts.'

'Wolsey?' he asked.

'Sorry?'

'It has not been long since... since we said goodbye to him. You are finding it hard.'

He didn't know; he hadn't heard.

'Yes,' she said, glad to talk about something else — even this. 'I'd actually not realised how hard. He was just a cat —'

Hass laughed softly. 'Bernice, you know that is not true. Tell me about Wolsey.'

'What like?'

'Anything. The things you remember.'

Bernice curled a lock of hair back behind her ear. 'I don't know... I used to like it when I was cross or bothered about something, because he'd keep away. He didn't like anxiety. So you'd have to calm yourself down if you wanted him to come to you.' She smiled at the memory. 'The best thing was to be reading something, because whatever it was he'd want to sit on it. So we'd end up playing this game where I wouldn't really be reading something, and he'd know I wasn't really reading it, but he didn't want to look like he was giving in to it...'

Soon she was laughing, the first time she'd laughed in ages.

'I... came here without thinking,' she said eventually. 'Odd, isn't it? I didn't think, "I'll go and see Wolsey". I just walked here, unconsciously.'

'It is where your heart took you.'

‘It’s where my hope took me... my hope that this’ll be over soon.’

‘What will be over?’

Bernice stood up. ‘It’s nothing. Thank you, Hass — I just needed to clear my head, get a bit of peace.’

‘That is what this place is for, Bernice.’ He patted her knee gently with his pincer. ‘You know you can return whenever you like.’

Jason was worried. For the second time tonight, Bernice wasn’t answering her door. He pressed the buzzer again.

He went in. The room was a mess: chairs overturned, clothes everywhere, books strewn about the floor. Bernice was not in sight. Jason’s mind numbed instantly.

Had Bernice been attacked? Had the killer come after her next? Had

—
‘Shit!’ She came out of the bathroom, hair a mess, eyes wild. ‘Where is it?’

‘Benny! You’re okay!’ Jason’s heart began to beat again.

‘What are you talking about?’

‘I thought... Never mind. What’s been going on? What have you been doing?’ She was upturning boxes, picking up piles of papers — important papers, by the look of them.

‘Benny? Hey, Benny? Bernice? What have you been doing?’

‘I didn’t do this!’ said Bernice, in as much a mess as the room. ‘All my notes, all my work... Just when the day couldn’t get any better, I think I’ve been burgled.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Jason. ‘Did they take anything?’

‘The only thing I know is missing is my diary... Oh, dammit, Jason. Take me away from all this.’

‘Yes, well... anyway,’ he said. ‘There’s actually somewhere we’re meant to be. Braxiatel has asked everyone to come and see him. I’ve been sent to fetch you.’

‘Braxiatel wants to see...all of us?’

‘You, me, Adrian, Bev, Hass... others maybe. He didn’t say.’

‘And he didn’t say why?’

‘Brax? You’re kidding, aren’t you? But I’m from twentieth-century Earth. I’ve read crime novels. I know what this means. It’s about Doggles.’

For the first time since Jason had come in, Bernice stood still.

‘I’ll get my jacket,’ she said.

Jason let Bernice go in first, then allowed the door to close behind them. Braxiatel was sat behind his desk; Bev and Adrian on a chaise longue to his left; Hass standing near the door. ‘Evening,’ said Jason cheerily. No one looked up at him.

‘Hello, Benny,’ said Hass at length. ‘Jason.’

Jason nodded at the Martian, then at Bev and Adrian. The Killoran looked embarrassed. Bev looked... well, like she always did.

Braxiatel stood up, motioning towards the two armchairs in front of his desk. 'I thought it might be best if we sorted all this out among the six of us. Discuss matters as we see them, see what we come up with...'

Bernice put her jacket on the chair next to Jason's — she hadn't put it on, he realised, just numbly carried it with her. She remained standing.

'In some ways,' continued Braxiatel, as he began to pace around the room, 'it's Bernice's fault. I've been thinking about what she said earlier. Who can possibly gain from Doggles's death? Where is the motive? All crimes need one. I'm not entirely sure she meant to, but Bernice implicated herself. Doggles's machine would have had serious consequences for her profession. But motive enough to kill?'

'You can't —' Bernice was silenced by Braxiatel raising a finger.

'All in good time. Perhaps, Bernice, you went to reason with Mr Doggles and things got out of hand. We must look at and consider every possibility. You're not the only one of us whose life might have been made difficult by the machine. Every one of us has secrets. If not specifically skeletons in cupboards, or murky pasts, then at least sensitive information we would rather keep to ourselves.

'I myself am in delicate negotiations with Hass's brother. Imagine the advantage Sset would have were he able to access such a machine. Miss Tarrant, Jason Kane, Adrian... you must all have things you consider private.'

'But you're assuming it must have been one of us,' said Jason.

'Indeed. It's the only possibility.'

'Braxiatel,' snarled Adrian. 'What are you talking about? There are hundreds of newcomers around — students, journalists, would-be entrepreneurs, chancers —'

'Ah, yes,' said Braxiatel. 'But we have new security protocols, don't we, Adrian? And there were no porters to witness the murder or the sabotage done to the history machine. Which means it must have been someone with the combination of the knowledge, the ability and the opportunity that only the six of us possess. I have trusted you, and one of you, at least, has betrayed me.'

'Can I say something now?' said Bernice. Jason looked round — she was behind him — and saw how determined she looked, if a little nervous. He turned back. Braxiatel smiled, almost imperceptibly, and sat down.

'I know what you've all been thinking,' said Bernice. 'That I'm a murderer. No doubt, I would have thought the same if, say, Jason had been accused. I understand. The evidence is persuasive. Ironically,

that was what I was arguing about with Doggles the night he died. Evidence. You can't brush past it, you can't ignore it. Evidence leads to conclusions; conclusions don't justify evidence.'

'True, very true,' said Braxiatel carefully. 'But evidence is subjective. We bring our own bias to everything we encounter. One man's proof of something is another man's justification for it.'

'But none of you has come out and said what I would have said to you,' she said, ignoring him. 'That I knew, deep down, you were innocent, no matter what the evidence said. You can't say that about me, can you? Any of you?'

'Bernice, I...' started Hass. He didn't finish his sentence.

'Maybe I expected too much,' she continued. 'Then again... I've doubted one of you, so perhaps it's hypocritical of me to moan about all this.'

'Benny?' Jason looked up at her. 'What do you mean?'

'It might interest you to know that Bev Tarrant has no alibi for the time of the murder.'

'Bev?' said Adrian. She remained silent.

'She told us, Brax,' continued Bernice, 'that she was with Adrian when Doggles was killed.'

'But you weren't,' said Adrian, true shock on his face. 'I was working on the new defence upgrades.'

Still Bev didn't say anything.

'And that's not all,' continued Bernice. She went to her jacket, still lying on the chair, and took out Joseph. She activated him and he hovered into the air.

'Hello, Bernice,' he said.

'I told you,' said Bernice to Braxiatel, 'that Joseph was not activated when Doggles was killed. And he wasn't. More's the pity, as he could have vouched for me. But he was activated earlier this evening when my rooms were ransacked and something taken. Something that someone who's trying to frame me might find useful.'

'I realised I would not be able to stop the intruder,' said Joseph, in his chirpy voice. 'So I pretended to be offline and recorded the incident in case Bernice should need the information.'

'And, Joseph...? Who was it who turned my place upside down?'

'Bev Tarrant.'

'She has no alibi,' said Bernice. 'She's trying to frame me. She's been a thief all her life. And the history machine could have exposed all of that. She killed Doggles.'

Bev looked at Braxiatel. He was leaning back in his chair, steepling his fingers, his eyes narrow. Again there was that sly upturn of the mouth. 'At the time of the murder, Bernice, Miss Tarrant was working for me.' Braxiatel stood and walked round from behind his desk. 'The

negotiations with Hass's brother have been... complicated. I needed the help of someone I could trust, and who would be able to assist me in, shall we say, unorthodox ways. At the time of Mr Doggles's death, she was here, in this office. She wouldn't say for fear of implicating me. I'm sorry, Bev. And I'm sorry to you, Hass. This puts you in rather an awkward position.'

'I shall say nothing about her involvement,' he said. 'You know where my loyalties lie.'

'And I'm most appreciative.' Braxiatel looked up again at Bernice. 'You were right, though, when you were talking about evidence. It's the basis of reasoning, isn't it? The foundation on which arguments and counter-arguments are built. You admit yourself that there is evidence heavily suggesting that you killed Mr Doggles, and you have rebutted that suggestion. I would have been surprised if you hadn't. It strikes me as odd, however, that your rebuttals have been solely concerned with implicating someone else...'

Jason scanned everyone's faces quickly. Adrian looked bemused, Bev pleased with herself, Hass seemed confused.

Braxiatel stepped closer to Bev. 'I wasn't sure until... until some information came to light.' He was now standing above Bev, looming over her. Damn her, she still had that cocky grin. Braxiatel looked her right in the eyes. 'I've spoken to everyone involved — everyone here, associates of Doggles, journalists, security guards. And I've been noticing things. For example, there was only one person who never asked how Doggles died, almost as if they knew.'

He spun round, looking straight at Bernice. 'Occam's razor, my dear. The reason you're prime suspect, the reason all the evidence points towards you, the reason we all doubt you... is that you killed him.'

'No!' Jason said. 'That can't be. Brax, it's Benny. You know, Benny.'

But there was something... He felt his world somersaulting beneath his feet. 'Jason's right,' said Adrian, getting up. 'I can't believe she did it. It's just not what she would do.'

Hass looked towards Braxiatel. 'You said new information had come to light.'

'Yes.' Braxiatel opened a desk drawer and took out a small book. 'I take it you recognise it, Bernice. It's your diary. I'm afraid I have to admit that, yes, Miss Tarrant acquired it on my instruction.'

'That's just bollocks,' said Bernice.

'It makes interesting reading. I'll spare the others the details, but answer me this. Why do you not record the argument you had with Doggles? My guards heard raised voices, yet there's no mention here. In fact, the two of you seem to be getting on rather too well at times.'

'Benny?' said Jason. 'Answer him.'

She breathed out. 'It was the machine. I knew it was genuine as

soon as he switched it on. I just... felt it. You felt it too, Brax. You felt the... I can't explain it, the shift in reality. Maybe it's because we've travelled in time, I don't know. But I saw things in the white light. The Collection destroyed... Jason and Peter both dead...' She shuddered. 'Me in bed with Doggles.'

'You hallucinated,' sneered Bev.

'No,' said Braxiatel quietly. No, she didn't.'

'I just couldn't let him get what he wanted. I did it to save the ones I love.' Jason recognised that defiance in her voice. 'And I'd do it again.'

The room was silent and still, but Jason could still feel it spinning. 'How...' He swallowed nervously. 'How did you kill him?'

'I take it he was found with a head injury...' she said.

Braxiatel nodded. 'That was the killing blow. I'd punched him.' She smiled. She actually smiled. 'He wasn't a tough man, he fell easily. While he was on the floor, I... kicked him in the back of the head. I couldn't stop myself. He didn't move after that.'

'But... why, Benny? Why?' Jason was fighting back tears.

'It was the only way to save everyone. Don't you see what that machine represented? It wouldn't have just allowed us to see history, it would have changed it, our understanding of it. Our understanding of everything. No more secrets, no more mysteries, no more privacy.' She smiled coyly. 'No more archaeologists.'

'You did this to save your job?' Adrian shouted. 'What am I supposed to tell Peter?'

Bernice's smile faded. 'I should have known you'd work it out, Braxiatel.'

'Well, I must admit I had some help.' He pressed an intercom buzzer on his desk. 'You see, Bernice, you're not the only one here with a star witness.'

The door opened, and there was Doggles, in a wheelchair. An orderly pushed the Cahlian inside the room.

Doggles coughed. 'I'm tougher than you think, Professor.'

'Indeed he is, Bernice. Mr Doggles is a unique creature. He's suffered at the hands of the Axis, experimented on by people who don't understand him.'

'But, for God's sake, why, Braxiatel?' said Jason. 'Why let us all think he was dead? You must have known it was Benny... Why leave her thinking she's a killer?'

'Because she is, Jason. The fact that Mr Doggles survived is beside the point. Bernice thought she'd killed him and left him for dead. To all intents and purposes, from her point of view, Bernice was a killer. Given that the attacker must have been one of us, I thought it best to leave that person ignorant of the real circumstances — for Mr Doggles's safety, for one thing.'

‘The “attacker”?’ said Bev. ‘But you knew who it was.’

‘Not at first,’ said Braxiatel. ‘Mr Doggles has only recovered consciousness in the last hour or so. That’s why, Miss Tarrant, I instructed you to acquire Bernice’s diary. I noted at the time that you didn’t ask why I needed it, nor questioned the morality of my request. I knew you had certain advantages.’

‘So...’ said Jason. ‘What now?’

‘That is the question,’ said Braxiatel. ‘I’m sorry, Bernice. The Interplanetary Police is on its way. I have no option but to hand you over. I’ll do what I can, you know I will. I’m sure the death penalty can be avoided.’

‘Benny...’ Jason’s voice cracked. ‘How could you...?’

At the nod of Braxiatel, the orderly who’d brought Doggles in stepped forward, carrying a pair of handcuffs.

‘I’m sorry, Bernice,’ said Braxiatel. ‘We must do the right thing.’

As the orderly put Bernice’s hands in the cuffs, Adrian got up and walked out of the room. He didn’t look back.

Hass stepped forward and placed a pincer on Bernice’s shoulder. ‘Do not worry, Bernice. There is another way...’ He spun round and lunged towards Braxiatel, his arms raised, ready to pummel down. Bev sprang up from her seat, gun in hand, in between Hass and Braxiatel. One shot was all it took, even with Hass’s cold-suit. The Martian fell instantly, steam wheezing all around him.

‘Bev!’ shouted Brax. ‘That will do!’

He knelt beside the body of the Martian, but soon shook his head. He looked up at Bev. ‘I needed him,’ he said sternly. That was all the rebuke she got.

‘You murdered him!’ wailed Bernice, straining from the orderly’s grip.

Bev regarded her. ‘No,’ she said. ‘You did.’ She nodded at the orderly. ‘Get her out of here.’

Bernice looked back at Jason, pleadingly. But he looked quickly away, and soon she was gone.

Back and There Again

By Dave Stone

‘Up, you silly sod.’

There are worse ways of waking at the crack of dawn than an ex-wife smacking you upside of the head, though at the time you could be hard-pressed to think of one. Especially in conjunction with a hangover of the diseased-feeling sort, where it seems like the yeast is still busily fermenting away in the bloodstream.

‘Glurk,’ I said, with all the suavity and whatever the other one is that are my watchwords. When I can remember them. The word that means you can always come up with clever and witty things to say. It’s on the tip of my tongue. Free-bar Irish boilermakers the night before, on a previously empty stomach. Not a good idea. ‘Glub, blurk. Brek, wog — glaark!’ I continued, swallowing the tobacco dog-end which I’d somehow fallen asleep with in my mouth. Yet another no-no I’d forgotten about: no smoking in the same apartment as an infant. I was surely going to catch an extra slice of hell for that.

The choking fit kick-started the mental processes, though, to the point where they vaguely wondered what my ex-wife was doing in my quarters, rather than the apartment she now shared with Peter and Doggles. A minor mystery solved by the gathering recollection of the end of the night before:

I’d been feeling a little depressed for a while, even before Doggles turned up and collapsed the state-vector of my timeline. I kept telling myself, never fear, it’ll pass, and probably more quickly than it should. One of these days I’d wake up and the light would just be back.

Day on day I’d waited. Week on week. Months. Years.

Too many glimpses of the stranger in the mirror, the guy with the haunted, hunted, frightened eyes. Far too many moments where you flash on yet another half-suppressed and horribly embarrassing moment from the past, and screw the eyes up tight, and try to remember anything you’ve ever done that hasn’t failed.

I think I’m getting old.

Do you get that? Those long, refrigerated nights in, cutting up old cigarettes to roll them up again, listening to the sound of distant traffic in the sky, and all the fun is being had by someone else, somewhere else, some other night. Dehydrated, desiccated veins and the essential self inside the head atrophied to hell and back; pins-and-needles and the strained and painless thudding of your heart and

knowing that, some time quite soon, it's going to stop.

And you never even got a proper go.

Let it roll off, let it go. Cut your losses and just switch it off.

Alternatively, let's go out and just get hammered.

* * *

I'd ended the evening of jollity and glee on a complete inability to face the journey home from where I'd ended up — wherever that had been.

Things had for some strange reason got increasingly vague. I'd simply headed for somewhere relatively nearby and familiar, operating entirely on autopilot, and let myself in.

I'd promised I would never do that any more, not without advance warning. Bugger.

Oh, well. At least the autopilot had landed me on the sofa. I don't think the ex-wife has ever forgiven me for rolling in one night, a while back, wandering into the bedroom without thinking about it, pitching myself onto the bed and landing on top of Doggles. My subsequent suggestion that I had far more likely bounced than squashed had not helped matters at all.

Ex-wife holds that there's this huge subconscious streak of territorial anger in me, constantly and desperately trying to reclaim a space in her life that was once mine. My theory is that I can just be a bit of an absent-minded dick when pissed.

'Sorry,' I said, on general principle. I'm thinking of having a T-shirt printed up, one of these days: I'm Jason and I'm Sorry.

'Look at the state of you,' she said, looking down at me with an almost tangible sense of pity for a world that had me in it. 'You're killing yourself by degrees. What the hell do you keep doing this for?'

'Helps me forget,' I said.

Ex-wife regarded the pathetically mewling feed-line with complete and utter contempt as it flopped and died.

'There's a call for you,' she told me, when it had finally expired. 'Some chap, says it's important.' She frowned. 'I don't like that, you know. You know I don't like you giving out my private contact number.'

'I don't think I ever have,' I said. 'Ever since you changed it, anyway. I can never remember exactly what it is. And I never worked out why you went through the bother in any case...'

'I wanted a number that was mine, not ours. And anyway, you have it stored on your comms system, back at your place.'

'I've been cut off' I told her. 'Since three weeks ago, I think. Ever since that bleeding machine killed me. I really should start thinking about paying the tariff.' Ex-wife sighed. 'Take the call in the kitchen. Doggles is up.'

I hauled myself from the couch, noting that I'd crashed fully clothed, still wearing my jacket and boots. Oh, well, again. At least I hadn't scattered clothes all over the place, like in the celebrated landing-on-Doggles incident.

Something felt a little odd in the trouser department, but at the time I didn't really notice. If I started worrying about every momentary bit of weirdness in my trousers, I'd never stop.

Ex-wife started smoothing out and rearranging sofa cushions, sorting out my mess with an expression of flat distaste. In a certain sense, that seemed to sum our relationship up — whether being actually together or not. Not for the first time, I found myself wondering why she had never got around to just relieving me of my copies of her keycards and heaving me out the door once and for all.

'Thanks,' I said, vaguely. 'You know, for...'

Ex-wife scowled at me. 'Just go pick up your call. And then go and have a wash or something.'

Who is constricting and restraining my life? I said, who is constraining and restricting my life? I really wanna know.

Well, yes. Yes, well. The standard-issue answer is it's self and self alone... it's the point of those poignant up-the-tracts that seem to turn upon the fact the poor sap's doing it to himself — hoist up by his own petard; acting out his own and personal and rather quite banal insecurities; falling under the tyranny he rightly deserves because he's just that li'l too afraid to fight the fight; blaming others for the failings, picking at the wounds, perpetuating the pain; lying in the bed he made, eating a big slice of the pie he baked; one finger pointing at the others an' three pointing right back there at you...

It's all some kind of epiphany — that whole Damascus transforming flare that has one drawing up, planting the two feet, sticking the manly finger in the air and vowing on the instant to be a better person in the future.

No more shall we be shackled by our petty lacks and imperfections; we shall open up, let other people in — the halt and lame shall, not to put too fine a point on it, make to walk. We will not pass upon the other side; we shall, forthwith, walk in the light, in truth and on the side of the angels evermore — homo vivan't, evermore, amen.

And this, of course, lasts about five minutes. Then our attention wanders on to something that might matter and we forget about it. So much for epiphany.

Real thing is, of course, of course, it's just old news. We've heard it all before, we know about it all — and it all goes on entirely too long to care. We have that hard-won particular bit of blindingly obvious self-knowledge, now, and we really do feel good about ourselves. You

wouldn't believe how good and mature and personally evolved we feel about ourselves; we're fine, okay, we're handling things and dealing with them and we're fucking fine about them, right?

Why did you leave me, Benny? Why did you go? Why did you take it all away? Don't touch me.

Doggles was at the kitchen counter, flipping through the GalNet Morning News on a piezoelectric screen-sheaf, of the sort that I always confuse on some deep level with the woodpulp-paper glossy magazines of my childhood.

It was set to the demographic-stream of the sort of life ex-wife and Doggles have — the life of the sort of people who, in my day, had the milk and the papers delivered to the door and went out to eat Chinese food.

On the cover, this year's Squamantista Prize winner, who had won for splashing ten-foot unprimed canvasses with accumulated bodily fluids, stood before one of the works in question and looked out at the world in general with a sense of great restraint.

Ex-spousal notions of subconscious territorial anger aside, I tended to get on well with Doggles — it wasn't like he was to blame for me and ex-wife breaking up, after all, and it wasn't that we'd been what you might call exclusive even when we'd been together. There are other people I blame for the way things went to hell between us — oh, yes, you'd better believe that.

In any case, Doggles and I sort of clicked. There was something about him that was just fun to be around, something that lifted me out of myself no matter how depressed I might be feeling.

'Good night?' he asked, unconcernedly, with a brief nod to the percolator seething away on the hob. It might have been my imagination — or it might be down to hindsight — but I got the vague impression that Doggles was consciously forcing his eyes to move casually away from me.

Forcing himself not to stare.

'Not entirely,' I said. I fixed myself a coffee, then went over to the comms unit fixed to the wall and punched up my call.

'What the hell you been doing, you idiot?' said a horribly familiar voice from the past, the memory of it slotting together like the lands and grooves of a key in a lock, in the way that Voices from the Past so often do. 'You kept me hanging on here for bleeding hours, seems like. Now don't say anything, and try not to react and just listen, okay?'

How do I feel? Not the hot little flashes of irritation, anger, little stabs of fear as I think I'm having a heart attack, shame, wanting to kill people. Not those momentary things that come and go — I mean, how do I feel?

I just feel sad, sort of melancholy and wanting to hold very still because it hurts to move, emotionally. I don't feel attractive. I imagine being held, and my mind just shudders away from it, because in my head it feels like falling off some precipice of emotion with which at this moment I just don't think I can cope. I feel timid. It's not like I want to curl up foetal... what I want to do is lie on my back under a sheet with my arms by my sides and be very still.

I have these blotchy, itchy patches on my body and I feel frightened and ashamed at the idea of anybody seeing them... I can't imagine going out and laying my old cheerful, flirty line on new people. I don't want the people I do know and love to see them and have their reactions. I can't be funny, or charming, or get open any more. I feel diseased and ashamed and it's sucked all the joy I used to feel out of my life.

Why did you take it all away? Why did you all go?

After I cut the connection I just stood there and stared at the phone for a while. There's some spy story or other I remember from back in my childhood — I keep thinking James Bond, but Bond wasn't exactly noted for moments of introspective contemplation. Anyhow, whoever it was, in the story the hero contemplates the mechanics of so-called coincidence. Feed experimental drugs to laboratory mice, this hero says, and several hundred generations down the line the double-headed monsters start being born. Meanwhile, the drug has been long-since passed as safe.

I mean, it's like you write this crappy little story treatment or something, for some low-rent xeno-porn stream with an audience of minus ten — you have to pay people to downlink it — and ten years later a copy of the material turns up in the Proximan Chain, someone starts pumping it out on an industrial basis, and the next thing you know somebody rich and powerful is trying to sue you because he has the same name as the villain.

Stuff like that comes back on you all the time, if you live just long enough — and you can never be quite sure if it's going to give you an unexpected big wet soppy kiss or turn around and bite you on the arse.

'Damn...' I said again, and turned from the phone. Ex-wife had joined Doggles in the kitchen, and was looking at me as if out of a small tableau: one half of a happy set of parents, spot of maternal pride in a kid who despite all expectations has suddenly done good. Maybe they were picking up on the way the call had suddenly energised me.

Doggles was merely raising an eyebrow, in friendly inquiry.

'That was Sol,' I said. 'My sleeping partner in Dead Dog in the

Water.'

'Really?' said ex-wife. 'I should have recognised the voice — if I'd ever actually heard it before in my life.'

'Dead Dog?' asked Doggles. 'What's a Dead Dog got to do with anything?'

'It's a Holo-vid production company Jason's involved in,' ex-wife said. 'Let's just say the output is an acquired taste and you're better off not knowing.'

'I'm surprised she hasn't mentioned it,' I said. 'I mean, what do the two of you ever talk about?'

'Other things than you,' said ex-wife. 'There are other things in the world than you. I just never thought it was worth mentioning.'

Which was basically, I sometimes think, the story of my life.

'Whatever,' I said, with a no doubt withering sense of disdain, 'Anyhow, Sol says that some big financial-backing guys out in the Catan Nebula are getting all hot and bothered over remaking Xenomorphic Bondage Slaves — and they want to do it legit. Tone down the mucky stuff, pump up the action and heave a multi-million budget into it. Sol wants me to go over there and talk to them.'

I was getting a bit excited despite myself. 'I mean, it'll probably turn out to be nothing in the end — but you never know, right? I have to order a flyer to the spaceport. Travel light and pick up some clothes and stuff on the way, you know?'

I'd expected some kind of comment on this, snarky or otherwise. Ex-wife, however, merely looked at me a little dubiously.

'Are you at least going to go and have a wash before it gets here?' she said. It might have been me, but ex-wife seemed to have been making a distinct point of mentioning this. I looked down and checked myself out briefly. I'd looked better and less generally rumpled, but I've looked a hell of a lot worse in my time.

I sniffed at the armpits under the jacket, but you can never really tell with yourself. 'Are you telling me I'm reeking?'

'No more than for usual,' Doggles said, cheerfully. 'You'll be fine. Really.'

'Stop it, Doggles!' Ex-wife's tone sounded a little out of context and odd. It took me a few moments to work out why.

It was, I realised, the sort of tone she'd used on me, during our marriage, whenever I'd come out with something actively unfair to someone, if not downright malicious.

Doggles looked a little shamefaced. 'I just mean this could be great for you. Just the thing to get you back on track and getting on with your life. Seriously.'

Ex-wife turned from him to regard me. 'And, seriously, you really need to go and have a wash.'

I want my life back, or some reasonable semblance thereof. I want to be able to relax, and wander around naked, and act how I want and feel happy and comfortable in my own home.

I want to feel at home in the place where I live. I want to stop living in a cell.

I want to go home.

I tend to distrust mirrors, these days. You can wander around and do all sorts just being yourself— and then I walk past a mirror and catch the reflection of someone older, sadder and almost infinitely else. Looking out at me, from the mirror of ex-wife's bathroom, I saw a tired-looking man on the wrong side of 35, and well on down the slope that would put him on the wrong side of forty. Hair gone lank and somewhat ratty to the point where it was really getting time to own up and shave the lot off. The scrubby kind of half-beard worn by those who can't quite actually grow one, but will forever be trying till the day they die.

Heavy-lidded, mud-grey eyes peering blearily out of incipient toxicosis in an innate and permanent state, it sometimes seems to me, of slightly frightened bewilderment. There's a famous shot of Syd Barrett looking just like that — only he had a basement in Cambridge to sod off home to in the end.

This suave and debonair image was hardly improved by the fact that at some point, some kind soul has seen fit to scrawl something that looked a little like a question-mark on my forehead in what seemed to be magic marker. Some clown's idea of a joke, obviously, during one of those moments when I must have nodded off the night before on account of being all tired and emotional.

Fortunately, ex-wife stocks her bathroom with a large variety of the kind of cleansing and facial-scrubbing products that it never quite occurs to men to buy. Within a matter of minutes, my face was pink and scrubbed and more pristine than it had been in months. I regarded it for a moment, then took the crawling horror from my trouser pocket and applied it to my forehead, where the question-mark had been.

I want —

'The important thing to remember,' said the voice on the comms-link, 'is the fact that I'm here talking to you, and telling you all this, doesn't mean we all get through this okay. It doesn't work like that. This might never have happened... well, let's call it before — and it may never happen again.

'For all I know, this is some vestigial fragment from the Fracture, some self-referring probability construct that's intersecting what

passes for your reality purely at random. All you can do is keep leaving yourself clues, anything that occurs to you, and hope that one of them finally makes it through the transition and connects.

‘Anyhow. The one thing it’s vital you remember, the one thing you have to do, is remember the... thing and what you have to do with it, okay?’

The one thing that’s true the universe over is that kids get up earlier than the grown-ups.

Peter was in his room, having been up for hours, studiously making himself ignore me and scribbling furiously with a marker, hard enough to tear the paper. I remembered how good he had been at drawing — and that’s not just parental pride talking, surrogate or otherwise — and it was like he was scrawling on and tearing at my heart.

I stood there. Watching him, trying to think of something — anything — to say. ‘Flyer’s here,’ ex-wife called from the other room.

‘Thanks.’ I strolled out of Peter’s room and headed for the hatch leading to the access ramp of the Collection’s flyer. For all the world happier and more relaxed than I had been for a good long while. Because I had something to do.

Ex-wife left Doggles and followed me out.

‘For what it’s worth,’ she said, ‘I’m sorry how things ended up working out. You know I wish things could have been different.’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ I said, shrugging. ‘They will be.’

I smacked Benny under the jaw and bundled her into the flyer.

I want to —

‘Warning,’ the flyer’s navicomp barked. ‘There appears to be an abduction stroke sexual assault in progress. This vehicle will be immobilised and a crash-priority alert sent to Collection Security Serkraaaaak! Bzzt!’

Back in the day, for a number of reasons, I spent quite a bit of time learning how to short out security-devices and the suchlike, with nothing more than my bare hands. I don’t propose to tell you how it’s done, for the simple reason that I might want to do it again sometime. Suffice it to say that the alarm shut off and the flyer sped off into the atmosphere.

Benny was already stirring. I hadn’t hit her all that hard — I’d just needed to stun her to prevent her from complicating matters while I dealt with the flyer.

Now she came out of it — and came for me like a wildcat, all snarls and nails.

‘Benny!’ I shouted. ‘I’m sorry! I’m not going to hurt you! Again, I

mean! I know that's what people say and they say they mean it, but I really do and I'm not and I mean it! Please!

Last of the lucid and cogently argued statements, there.

Eventually, though, she realised that I was doing absolutely nothing but fending her off and receiving defensive wounds. She backed away from me, so far as the confines of the speeding flyer allowed, nothing in her eyes but a cold and wary trauma-deadness that left me feeling as desolate inside as she looked.

'You bastard,' she said, quietly. 'What do you think you're trying to do?'

I suppose I could have continued along the lines of the 'sorry' theme, or the 'I'm not going to hurt you' theme or begged her just to listen to me — but there wasn't time. All I could do was lay it out for her and hope that something clicked. All I could hope was that there was enough of the Benny I had once known left.

'That call I got,' I said. 'It wasn't from Sol. It was... well, it was from me. Some version of me — from the future, or the past, or from sideways, you know?'

'It wasn't you,' Benny said, still with that cold dead calm. 'It didn't sound like you. And oh, dear God, you will never know the relief that came when her first reaction wasn't 'that's impossible'.

'I can think of any number of ways I could disguise my voice,' I said, 'for any number of reasons. Just trust me when I say it was me. And I told myself some things.'

'Oh, yes?' said Benny, raising an eyebrow with a flash of sardonic irony that almost had me breaking down and howling. 'And what did you tell yourself?'

'Our reality's fractured,' I told her. 'Shattered, even, like a Klein Jar dropped on a concrete floor, and the pieces cobbled back together into an only halfway-coherent lump. Our timelines — our lives — have been stripped into it, our minds are trying to cope and we're going mad trying to come to terms with all the inconsistencies and contradictions. When did we split up, Benny? When did we finally call an end to it and why?'

'We...' Abruptly, Benny's face went from the deadness of shock and misery to the slackness of no mental impulses whatsoever as her brain tried to access information that simply wasn't there. She recovered just as suddenly, as though a switch had been thrown. 'I don't...'

'Was it before or after I died in that explosion?' I demanded. 'And why isn't there anything odd about me still being alive after dying in an explosion?'

I sighed. 'We're going crazy trying to fit it all together. With me it's like a reversion to a kind of suicidal depression and thinking like I was back in the twentieth century, because that's where my deep-level

subconscious is still living. With you it's... I don't know, because controlling you is fundamental to the nature of the fractured world. You're being controlled. You're under control.'

'Who...?' Benny seemed genuinely puzzled. 'Who would...'

'Who do you fucking think!' I shouted. 'It's Doggles! He's the one who's doing it! It was that bleeding machine of his — and look what it's got him! Maybe he's not controlling it consciously, or then again he is, but either way he's able to affect the world and impose his desires on it. And what he wants — what he desires — is you.'

'It wasn't like that,' Benny said, defensively. 'There was no coercion. We simply got together on Paremorbin. It was perfectly natural. Only... that happened months ago, eight years in the future, after you died...'

You could also see the cracks appearing in her sense of her own timeline. I had the advantage now, and I had to push it hard.

'We don't have much time, Benny,' I snapped, 'or maybe we've got all the time in the world. Maybe we've played this little scene out any number of times, over and over again. I think he's able to reset this little broken world of his, when he feels it going out of control.' I put my hand in my pocket and pulled out the... thing. 'Just let me —'

Benny stared at the... thing in pure terror — then lashed out in panic and knocked it out of my hand. Quite the obvious reaction, I suppose, when confronted by a sudden, slimy clump of ganglionic tentacles and barbs. Maybe I should have taken the time to explain what it was.

In any case, it didn't matter now, because our time had run out. As Benny struggled and clawed at me again, as I scrabbled desperately for the... thing, the suspicions of Doggles — whether conscious or unconscious — finally caught us up.

I want to go —

Mind and body and identity hazing into nothing, the bright shards of a shattered world spinning and slicing through and chopping off the bits that never seem to fit. A black bell ringing in an empty sky. World without end, forever and ever, and always the same world, yet again, amen.

Keep hold of the... thing, I tell myself. It's a special thing, a magic thing, given to me once, at some point, by what passes for a man, the name of whom I cannot now recall. It's a quasi-living thing, an extradimensional entity with no name that can be known in any world I will ever know. Existing outwith of space and time, it will always be there, if I can just keep hold of it.

Encoded into its subcellular structure are the identity-engrams of someone called Jason Kane, and someone called Bernice Summerfield.

That would quite likely be important, if I had the faintest idea of who they were.

With the last vestige of my body-sense, I take the marker pen I seem to recall stealing from a small child who sits, scribbling nothing that makes sense, on the floor. I use the pen to make a mark on what I think was once my head. Will it carry over?' I think. 'It did before. And maybe, next time, I'll think up a mark that actually means something.'

I don't know what the thought means. And then it is gone.

All I have left is a sense of disappointment, the sense that I — whoever I might be — have managed to screw something incredibly important up again.

Oh, well. Perhaps I'll get it right next time.

We live in hope.

— want to go home.

'Up, you silly sod.'

There are worse ways of waking at the crack of dawn than an ex-wife smacking you upside of the head, though at the time you could be hard-pressed to think of one. Especially in conjunction with a hangover of the crawling and diseased-feeling sort, where it seems like the yeast is still busily fermenting away in the bloodstream.

'Glurk,' I said, with all the suavity and whatever the other one is that are my watchwords. When I can remember them. The word that means you can always come up with clever and witty things to say. It's on the tip of my tongue. Free-bar Irish boilermakers the night before, on a previously empty stomach. Not a good idea.

'Glub, blurk. Brek, wog — glaark!' I continued, swallowing the tobacco dog-end which I'd somehow fallen asleep with in my mouth. Yet another no-no I'd forgotten about: no smoking in the same rooms as an infant. I was surely going to catch an extra slice of hell for that.

The choking fit kick-started the mental processes, though, to the point where they vaguely wondered what my ex-wife was doing in my quarters, rather than the apartment she now shared with Peter and Doggles. A minor mystery solved by the gathering recollection of the end of the night before...

One of My Turns

By Sin Deniz

Dizziness. Darkness. Disorientation. Hell, all manner of descriptive 'd's. Bernice opened her eyes tentatively, yet her situation did not become any clearer. She had one hell of a headache and dared not try to stand, knowing she would be on her back again within seconds. Which wouldn't be very dignified.

The head-over-heels feeling was very familiar to Benny; reminding her of nights when each glass was meant to be her last, and she was still drinking the day after she'd first said she was going home. Older now, and a mother, she'd thought those kinds of nights out long passed. What had she been thinking of? What had she been up to?

Still, she couldn't lie about forever. She lifted herself up, and connected with the sunshine, searing her eyeballs with dazzling intensity. Shielding her eyes, Bernice noticed her forehead felt damp. She turned her head from the sun and examined her fingertips, wet with dark red liquid.

'What the hell hit me?' she asked as she scanned the area for clues. No one answered.

Bernice was sat (a generous description for her semi-sprawled state) on the makeshift podium, set out on the grass so everyone would be able to see the history machine in action. She turned round slowly, in deference to her pounding head, checking that she really was alone — as she'd assumed. The history machine loomed above her, the tiny screen set into it grey and dead, the screen blackened as if by fire. The sight jogged her memory somewhat; Doggles and his experiment had gone awry. Why was no one else here, though? She couldn't believe that her friends in the audience would just have left her here, like this, after the explosion. Especially not Jason. He was more attentive when she was on her back.

'Maybe I'm invisible now,' she said as she got unsteadily to her feet. A brilliant blue sky smiled down at her, guilting her out for feeling so woozy. Maybe the others had gone to the beach, she thought. If only the Collection had one.

Thinking a coffee might help to clear her head, she headed over to the Mansionhouse. The corridors were quiet, eerily so. There was a coffee machine just inside the door, as she'd requested. She hated giving speeches, and if the caffeine didn't settle her nerves, it at least made her braver about standing up in front of people. Billions of them, and all.

Bernice filled a small paper cup from the pot, and gulped down mouthfuls of the stuff before really being aware that the coffee was cold. How long had she been lying unconscious outside? She popped the cup into the auto-recycle bin and headed off to investigate. The library was empty, and silent — which never happened. She passed between the rows of tall, skinny shelves, stuffed with every kind of recording format the cosmos had been able to devise. The chance to get at all these varied, precious works, not just to read them but to hold them, really touch them... Braxiatel's libraries drew students and academics from all over everywhere. Herself included. The place was always teeming with people.

But nothing. No one.

As she left the library, however, Bernice saw a familiar face coming towards her. Jess Carter always dressed older, more dowdily than she really was, but today she'd made concessions to the sunshine. Her knee-length shorts showed off pasty and pale calves, though Bernice had to admit that otherwise Jess had pretty good legs. As Bernice got nearer, Jess looked a bit worse for wear, her eyes were bloodshot and her clothes looked slept in. Bernice had always thought Jess the quiet type — her offer of a night out was still standing from more than a year ago. But now the woman looked like she'd made up for lost time.

'Morning Jess,' said Bernice. 'Or should I say afternoon?' Jess broke into a huge, knowing grin and Bernice couldn't help but smile back.

'Rough night?' Jess asked, looking her up and down.

'I... uh... can't remember.'

'No change there then! But how did you cut your head? And where did you get to last night? Why didn't you return my call?'

'Whoa there, Jess,' said Bernice, putting her hands out to her. 'Hold your horses; my head's pounding like a Mercallian hyperdrive and I'm still trying to work out what happened to the experiment.'

'What experiment, what are you talking about?'

'Doggles's — time thingammy... experiwhatsit'

Jess stared at her, as if checking for signs of some prank. 'Benny; that was three weeks ago. What do you mean?'

Bernice felt muscles clench in her jaw. 'But I've just come in from there,' she said. 'The machine's still there, and the podium, and uh...' She leant against the wall, her headache getting intolerable.

'Yeah, well,' said Jess. 'It's still there because you and Doggles are examining it to find out what went wrong. Aren't you?'

'Well, yeah,' said Bernice. 'Of course.' She scratched at her head, feeling the blood still oozing from her hairline. 'What did go wrong?'

Jess folded her arms. 'It was a complete balls-up, Benny. Doggles set off the machine, you ran to it and the whole thing exploded — or rather imploded — and knocked you off your feet.'

‘I remember that, of course I remember that! But what’s happened since then?’ One side of Jess’s mouth curled upwards in a smile. ‘I get it, Benny my girl,’ she said. ‘You want to wipe the Ethan incident from memory.’

‘The what?’

‘You know... last week, my place, party and then afterwards... The one with the three arms and two -’ Bernice’s head was spinning. She didn’t remember anything of the sort. But surely she wouldn’t have —

‘Sorry, Jess,’ she said. ‘I’m going to have to get home and sleep this off. I’m wrecked.’

‘Know how you feel love,’ said Jess, punching her mockingly on the arm. Bernice took a step back, surprised: Jess wasn’t usually one for physical contact. ‘Unfortunately, some of us have work to do. Got this research to be done by Wednesday and I can’t leave it to my gang to get done in time, can I?’ She fluttered her eyelashes. ‘They’re utterly lost without me.’

Laughing, she headed off down the corridor. Bernice watched her go, amazed by the transformation. Jess had always been a bit of a loner. Since when had she suddenly blossomed?

And who was Ethan? And what did he have two of? From down the corridor, Jess called back something about remembering a party at the weekend. Benny nodded, as if of course she understood, then hurried on her way.

‘Watch the seeds!’ came the cry as Bernice stepped right into the soil a few metres from the designated path. She looked up apologetically, her eyes meeting Mister Crofton’s peeved expression.

‘Sorry,’ she said, regaining her balance. ‘I don’t know what came over me. I hope I haven’t damaged anything.’

Crofton regarded her, as he might a shrub that had sickened. ‘You look like you need a tea,’ he said. ‘Come take a seat in the greenhouse.’

‘Thank you,’ she said, letting him put his arm round her waist as he led her over. ‘I’m really not feeling too hot today.’

‘Today? I’d say for the last few weeks, Professor. Since that explosion of yours you’ve not really been with any of us!’

‘Yes,’ she said, taking a seat under a vast canopy of foliage. ‘I mean it even feels weird talking to you now; as though I shouldn’t be able to... Oh, forget I even said that. It sounds ridiculous.’

Crofton’s eyes twinkled. ‘But you said the same thing to me last week, and the week before.’

‘I did? I don’t remember that! What’s got into me?’

‘I’m waiting for you to tell me that. Have you spoken to Mr Braxiatel about it yet?’

‘I will; I’m meaning to. I think I... oh, I’ve got another headache coming on. It’s like it’s whenever I even think about it. Sorry, I need to go home again, to rest.’

‘I agree,’ said Crofton, appraising her. She didn’t like the way he did it, there was something unhealthy about his gaze. He had always been a difficult old man, but he’d never shown any interest in her physically before. ‘Let me clean up that cut on your head,’ he said, reaching out to touch her with work-dirty fingers. ‘How did you get it?’

She fought back the urge to shrink back from him. ‘What if I say no idea?’ He prodded her forehead idly. It didn’t hurt her, it didn’t feel like anything really. ‘That’s sounds about right at the moment,’ he said, withdrawing his hand and examining the bloody stain on his fingertips.

Bernice sat while Mr Crofton applied some ointment to her head. It didn’t sting, though he said it would. She found herself hugging her shoulder, so he’d not have the opportunity to glance down her top. It was silly — why had he put her on edge?

‘Thanks Mr Crofton,’ when he was done.

‘Always a pleasure, Bernice,’ he said, seeming oblivious to her anxiety toward him, his conspicuous physicality. ‘Watch those seeds, mind.’

Benny hurried back to her room, without any further encounters. She didn’t want people around her. Collapsing onto the bed, she’d not even taken her shoes off before she was away into fitful sleep.

On waking, Benny’s headache had subsided a little. The room was a pleasant murky grey, which was not too much strain on the eyes. She stretched, enjoying the feel of the duvet against her naked skin, mustering the will to get up. Reaching her arms out to the sides of the bed she touched... flesh.

There was somebody else in her bed!

‘Who the —?’ she squealed, grasping for the bedside lamp while at the same time yanking the duvet tightly around herself. The light plinked on, revealing a groggy Jason Kane sprawled out beside her. He didn’t have any clothes on, either.

‘Benny,’ he said, voice gruff with sleepiness, ‘these nightmares are getting silly.’

Her initial reaction was to kick the swine out of her bed. Yet he seemed so settled and unthreatening, lying there, and she couldn’t actually think what he might have done to offend her. She wracked her brain, sure he’d done something. Jason turned over, away from her and the light.

‘Jason,’ she said to the back of his head, ‘Should I be angry at you?’

'If you want,' he said, unhelpfully.

'Did anything happen three weeks ago that could have me overreacting now?' He paused, either considering the question or pretending to be asleep. 'Well?' she prompted.

'Three weeks ago... why?'

'Just answer the question,' said Bernice through gritted teeth. At least exasperating, middle-of-the-night conversation with Jason felt familiar.

'Sorry,' he said, twisting back round to face her. He rubbed the heel of one hand into his eyes, forcing himself awake. She ignored the other bits of him that were waking up, too. This was important. 'Well,' he said. 'Three weeks ago,' he said.

'Yes?'

'Well, we had that hell of a row, didn't we? I'd said something about your friend Jess, or rather certain parts of her, and you said you never wanted to see me again as long as you lived.'

'So why the hell are you here in bed with me then?'

'Because you say that every week. Can I have some duvet? It's cold, you know.' Benny resigned herself to him, and they rearranged the bed, plumping the pillows before cuddling up together. Again, tangled up around him seemed familiar and safe.

'Jason,' she said.

'Hmm?' he replied, contentedly.

'Tell me everything that's happened to me in the last three weeks, starting with the experiment and Doggles.'

'Are you all right?' he said, dead serious though not moving back from the embrace.

'Please. Just indulge me.'

'Okay, okay. Indulge I can do.' He sighed. 'We were sat watching ready for this wonderful experiment and the history machine started to sound a bit poorly. You ran up to see what had happened and the thing blew up and threw you across the lawn. Dr Wt'hlrm checked you over. You had mild concussion but nothing serious. You had a couple of days' rest and since then you have been working extensively with Doggles on the machine, trying to help him figure out what went wrong. He's not been much use, though. That's it, I think.'

'Oh,' she said. 'There's nothing else? Not at all?'

'Well, of course, you've had your free time, too. Although not much of it thanks to Doggles and his piece of... his machine.'

'And?'

'Well, you've spent time with Jess, Bev and a smidgen with little ol' me.' Jason nuzzled up to her, kissing her neck in that way he thought got her going. Instead she just needed to pee.

'Hang on,' she said, pushing him aside and dashing across the room

to the loo. She locked the bathroom door behind her — something she never normally did and tried to get some sort of order in her head. Focus on things that were very clear, that she could easily remember. The horny git in the other room was Jason Kane, her husband (or rather ex-husband) and downright pain in the backside. Yeah, that made sense.

The experiment was a failure and she'd tried to turn it off before it blew up. Yep, that worked too. She'd been out with the girls since then. So all her life was explained away. All the pieces where they should be.

She washed her hands, and took one great stride back to the bathroom door, stepping over the litter tray. Which wasn't there.

'Jason!' she yelled as she lunged through the door.

He had been asleep again. 'Benny are you for...'

'Where's Wolsey?'

'Bloody hell,' he said, getting uppity now. 'How many times?'

'Tell me!'

'If I said pushing up daisies you wouldn't do something horrible to me would you?'

She knew, of course she knew, but it still shocked her to hear it. Bernice held onto the door, furious at herself for this weakness. This wasn't who she was! Bernice Summerfield was a tough cookie, renowned for it.

'Just come to bed, Benny,' Jason said, much more kindly.

Again, she felt wary of him, for no reason she could think of. But she knew she couldn't stay where she was all night, hovering in the bathroom doorway without any clothes on.

She crept into her side of the bed, careful not to meet Jason's body at any point. He was warm, comforting beside her, and he was letting her have the space she obviously craved. She closed her eyes, feeling foolish and paranoid. Sleep began to come, and she saw shapes in the darkness. A man with three arms, stooped down to kiss her. Jason as an old man, singing in the bath. Campfire on a red planet, and Doggles revealing his body to her, and his patchwork of terrible scars. Scars that meant something, that linked him inextricably to the —

Glass; she was surrounded on all sides by glass and the sun was burning, burning a hole in her; her body huge and heavy with the child inside her, aching on her back, looking up through transparent ceilings while voices muttered warnings and attempted to calm someone down.

(Maybe her?)

She couldn't see any faces, couldn't hear their words. Yet these people were here to help her... She knew they were helping.

Through what, though? Where was she? What had happened?

She tried to move, to show them she knew they were there. Pain seared through her...

Benny woke in shock, clutching her arms round her stomach as the alarm clock chirruped her awake. She looked quickly round, not knowing where she might be. She was in her room, the familiar, none-too-tidy affair. Joseph — the alarm clock asked her if she'd like some coffee. Yes, that would help. Another dream about pregnancy. Another nightmare.

Jason slept soundly beside her, and around the curtains came a faint glow of morning light. She got out of bed, fussed with a dressing gown and put a hand out to right the reproduction Constable, hanging askew on the wall. Arundel, the frame explained. She stared at the word, sure Jason had bought her *The Haywain*. But why would he swap pictures? She'd ask him when he was awake. She took the coffee Joseph carried over in his sensor field, and left the picture alone.

'You're up early this morning,' said Joseph.

'Meeting Doggles. At least I better be.'

'Well, that will be nice,' said Joseph.

'Will it?' said Bernice, and started rooting about for her clothes. She felt sure she'd forgotten something. Something that linked something... Taking another sip of coffee, she decided that anything important would return to her.

* * *

As Bernice approached the library she heard a whistle and looked around to see Bev Tarrant coming her way, her hair done up in girlish bunches. Bernice could see that there was something troubling her, something big. And it wasn't just being up so early.

'Benny, where've you been?' asked Bev. 'You've been like a stranger these last few days?'

'Have I?' she replied as Bev hugged her. 'You know how it is with this machine and Doggles. I don't know where I am.'

'Tell me about it. Are you getting anywhere now?'

'To be honest, I haven't the foggiest. How are you doing anyway?'

'Not bad considering. You know, taking each day at a time.'

Benny sifted through the murk inside her head; sure she should know what Bev was referring to. Damn this memory loss/history machine! It made her seem ditzy.

'I understand —' quizzical look from Bev '— well, of course, I don't understand but you know...'

'Benny, are you sure you're all right?'

'Yeah. I think so. It's just this, this... let me get this machine problem out of the way and then we can talk properly.'

‘Okay.’ Bev gave a rebuffed look but hugged her friend anyway. Again, the intimacy made Benny feel awkward, like she didn’t know how to respond. Bev, though she must have noticed, said nothing. ‘I’ll speak to you soon.’

Benny watched her friend hurry away, cursing herself. She didn’t know what she wanted. Part of her wanted to forget Doggles, to take Bev for breakfast and sort everything out. She could take notes; keep them on her so she didn’t keep spending her whole time wandering about the place as if in a dream, asking stupid questions.

But no, there was work to do. Doggles would be waiting for her, and he’d already got shirty about her less-than-dedication to the project.

She made her way to the podium, where all the bits of the machine had been moved. And, of course, Doggles wasn’t there.

She had meant just to find him, but when she’d reached his building in the hamlet, she had just kept walking. The morning was cool and fresh, just the thing to clear the cobwebs from her head. Holding her shoes in one hand, she walked barefoot through the soft grass, feeling the stress and anxiety drain out of her.

As she approached Mr Crofton’s greenhouse, she noticed Adrian and a team of Killorans working on some renovations nearby. He was always building something, but the ferocity with which he now handled the blocks of stone drew her attention.

‘Afternoon, Adrian,’ she said cheerily. ‘How’s everything?’

Adrian scowled, straining under a hod of pale yellow bricks. He was polite enough to grunt an answer. Bernice was surprised by his attitude — usually he was glad to make time for her. She persevered. ‘How’s your...’ She paused, digging into the paltry fragments of memory still there for her. ‘How’s your little boy doing?’ She couldn’t remember his name, but she reckoned she had covered that one well.

If Bernice had been surprised by the first, muted response from Adrian, then it was safe to say that what followed her second question was a shocker. One minute she was asking Adrian about his son, the next she was trying to get up from the grass, blood pouring down her face while three Killorans battled to hold Adrian back from her. She could not have mistaken the fury in his eyes, that savage need to kill her. Not understanding, not daring to ask why, she scrabbled to her feet.

She tried to walk, and stumbled. A hand caught her arm, guided her away from the builders and over towards the greenhouse. She turned to look at her companion but her vision was clouding...

Bernice woke to find herself on a pallet of some kind, wrapped in sheets and blankets of varying shapes and sizes. Above her she could

see the sky through a glass ceiling... a sudden memory of prison grabbed her. No... not there! She jumped up from the makeshift bed, and almost collapsed again.

‘You must take things slowly, Bernice. You will do yourself an injury.’

Hass handed her a mug of sweet, pungent tea. He had rescued her — the only one able to stand up to Killorans. She had felt his hands, easily lifting her up and away. But Hass had pincers, not hands like those she remembered... Still the confusion. No pain though, her unease a normal(ish) size. She breathed out, slowly, and sat herself back down on the pallet. The tea was a heady concoction of herbs, something she didn’t recognise.

‘Thanks,’ she said. ‘I wish I’d come straight over to you instead of trying to talk to Adrian. I can still talk to you, can’t I?’

Hass regarded her. ‘What happened there, Bernice? What did you say?’

‘I don’t know. I asked him how he was, and then about his son, and he went berserk.’

‘Oh.’

“‘Oh” in a bad way?’

‘Adrian does not have a son, Bernice. He and Ms Tarrant lost the child she had been carrying.’

Bernice dropped her mug, and tea splashed around her feet. Hass said nothing, just collected a cloth and knelt in front of her, dabbing at the liquid and gathering the broken bits of china into one of his pincers. She was hardly aware of him, could only think of the beautiful, doggy boy she’d once known. She could see the child almost in front of her, happy and carefree, running to Adrian, calling him ‘Daddy’. The boy’s name still eluded her, but he had been real.

‘It’s not just that my memories are missing,’ she said, sadly. ‘I’ve got all these memories that can’t even be.’

‘The explosion did more damage than we thought,’ said Hass. ‘Your mind has been affected.’

‘No,’ said Benny. ‘It’s not that. I think the world has been affected, and that’s what’s got me lost.’

‘Hmm,’ said Hass, warily. ‘Perhaps we should consult an expert.’

‘Brax has hidden himself away from everybody. He won’t talk to us!’ He was staring at her. ‘What?’

‘Who is “Brax”?’ asked Hass.

The pounding in her head intensified

‘Irving Braxiatel,’ she said. ‘The founder of this whole planet, you know?’

Hass looked perplexed, yet Bernice could sense him composing himself to deal with ‘poor, confused Benny’. Poor, confused Benny had

other ideas, however, and she wasn't prepared to go through another round-the-houses discussion with someone who was as caught up in this as she was. Whatever 'this' was. Brax would have the key to it all though, she felt certain. Her only hope was to confront him, whether he wanted to see her or not.

'Hass,' she said. 'Let's hold that thought and I'll get back to you later.'

'As you wish Bernice.' He seemed relieved, never one for dramatic dialogues anyway.

Bernice left the garden and made her way back towards the Mansionhouse. And whatever surprises Brax had in store for her.

Her knuckles were sore after pounding on the door for several minutes. On the walls around her rattled portraits and landscapes and abstract works.

'Brax, I know you're in there, open up!'

Nothing. Bernice slumped down, her back against the door, and wondered what she was going to try next. He had to be in there, in his private inner sanctum, shutting out whatever it was that had gone wrong on the Collection. She didn't believe the excuses the porters had given her — that he was still in negotiations with Sset. If he was hiding, it had to be because he knew what was happening, because he had all the answers she craved.

She reached down to her hip for Joseph, but she must have forgotten to clip him to her belt that morning. Instead, she was amazed to find a gun, neatly positioned in a holster. When had she picked that up? Carefully, Bernice withdrew the gun and examined it. The grip had been moulded to exactly fit her hand. Swirling down the barrel in silver letters was a name — 'Joseph'.

Gun snugly in her hand, Bernice got to her feet. She tapped the barrel against the door.

'Brax, I know you're in there and I know you don't want to talk to me. But on this particular occasion I'm determined to see you.'

Nothing. Well, she'd given him the chance. She clicked off the safety with the side of her thumb, and fired once into the lock on the door.

It didn't do any damage. The classy veneer seemed to ignore the blast.

'Shit!' said Bernice.

A click. And the door opened neatly inwards. Perhaps she had just sussed the password. She grabbed the door handle and went in before Brax had time to change his mind. Her footsteps echoed loudly on the flagstones. There was something warped about the great looking glass above the mantelpiece, so that it twisted the reflection of the perfect goddess on the ceiling, sitting amongst the clouds with all her cherubs

and maidens. Bernice resisted the urge to glance upwards, to see the painting as it should be. Her eyes and her gun were on the man sat behind the mahogany writing desk. He sat in his high-backed chair against the grande fenêtre, the huge window that looked out on to the Versailles garden. Braxiatel looked up at her, and raised an eyebrow.

Bernice immediately felt foolish, and lowered the gun. The man sat opposite Braxiatel did not look round. Between them was a chess set, a game in play, the opposing sides equally matched.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Bernice. ‘You’ve got company.’

‘Yes,’ said Braxiatel. ‘And it disturbs the concentration, you hammering on the door.’

‘I said I was sorry,’ she said. ‘But Brax, I needed to speak to you.’

‘You did, did you?’ He glanced quickly at the man sat in front of him. Again, the visitor seemed not to react. He was human, whoever he was. Not Sset then, but perhaps an emissary from him.

‘You know what’s going on, don’t you?’ Bernice asked. ‘You have to know what’s going on.’

‘Hmm,’ said Brax, steepling his fingers under his chin. He shrugged at his guest. ‘Do you want to tell her?’

The man didn’t respond.

‘Who is he, anyway?’ asked Bernice.

Brax smiled thinly. ‘Oh, I’m forgetting my manners. But I think we... you have already met.’

The man opposite him got to his feet and turned to her, his hand out in greeting, that same superior smile on his face.

‘Hello Bernice,’ he said. It was Brax.

He was older, his hair flecked with grey and his eyes full of history and pain. But there was no denying that he was the same man. Bernice plumped down in the armchair to her left.

‘I’ll have a sherry while you explain it all,’ she said. The older Brax went over to the decanter and poured dark amontillado into three crystal glasses. He handed the drinks round, but his younger self declined. The older man looked disappointed. Bernice knocked her own drink down in one gulp — surprised by the nutty tang — and swapped the empty glass for the full one, stood unwanted on the desk. Both Braxes shook their heads, indulgently.

‘So,’ she said. ‘What the hell is going on? The history machine’s done something to time, hasn’t it?’ She regarded the older man. ‘And you’ve come to help us sort it out.’

‘To some extent,’ said the older Brax. ‘This man’s an imposter, Bernice,’ said the younger Braxiatel.

The older man seemed surprised. ‘I most certainly am not,’ he said. ‘If anything, he is the imposter!’

‘Oh, dear,’ said Bernice. ‘It’s going to be one of those which-one’s-

the-real-Brax things, is it?' Both Braxiatels grimaced.

'I very much hope not,' said one.

'We are endeavouring to keep things dignified,' said the other.

Benny waved her sherry glass in the direction of the chess game. 'You're deciding over the chessboard, then?'

'We're establishing credentials,' said the older man. 'It's a question of authority.' Bernice laughed. 'You can't decide who's in charge, is that it? Couldn't you just arm wrestle or something?'

'That lacks the appropriate intellectual acumen,' said the older Braxiatel. 'My junior self here needs convincing that I really do know best.'

Bernice smiled sweetly at the younger man. 'Isn't he annoying when he's like this?'

The younger Braxiatel sat back in his seat. 'All very amusing, I'm sure,' he said. 'But why don't you hear his proposal. Then maybe you'll appreciate my concerns.'

Bernice turned to the older man. He looked suddenly rather uncomfortable. It was her favourite expression from him — a sure sign he'd been caught out.

'You're sensitive to it, aren't you, Bernice?' he said. 'You can feel what's happening on the Collection.'

Bernice nodded, all seriousness now. 'It's like I'm slipping between different versions of time,' she said. 'It's like each time I look round, someone's shuffled the deck again. And there's something, some fragment, I keep not quite remembering...'

'We're in some kind of feedback loop,' said Braxiatel. 'History turning in on itself.'

'Yes,' said Bernice, glancing at the younger man. 'That's exactly what I'm feeling — like I'm going round and round and round.'

'I can break the cycle,' said the older man.

'He thinks he can break the cycle,' said his younger self.

'Go on then. What are you proposing?' asked Bernice.

'A reality bomb,' said the old man, holding her gaze. 'That's why I'm here. We can slow the spread by destroying realities. Like pulling down houses to stop fire taking hold of a city. We can at least buy ourselves time before everything collapses on itself.'

'It won't work,' said the younger man.

Bernice got to her feet. Both men held back, letting her puzzle it out for herself. She stared at the chess pieces, poised in the midst of bloody conflict. The casualties were the same on both sides: three pawns, a knight and both bishops. A deadlock of wills. And yet, something was not quite right. She was spellbound by the chessboard, sure the answer was right there in front of her. Of course, she thought.

'You're older than he is,' she said.

'Yes,' said the older Braxiatel. 'I've been travelling.'

'Your game hasn't improved, though. You being the senior one, I'd have expected you to trounce him. But you're not any more learned than he is. Are you?'

The older Braxiatel sneered. 'He's the weaker one, Bernice. He's the disgrace. He's too cowardly to do what must be done.'

Bernice didn't take her eyes off the older man. 'This bomb of yours. It destroys this reality. But how do you keep the Collection safe? How do we get to survive?' The older man smiled. 'Ah,' he said. 'I'm afraid that we don't.'

'Right,' said Bernice. And shot him in the forehead.

He didn't have a chance to cry out. The shout had been from his other self, reaching over the desk to grab the gun from Bernice's hand. She didn't resist. The old man had fallen backwards, hard against the mantelpiece. The glass shattered over the top of him as he fell to the ground. He lay, unmoving, broken shards all round him, some reflecting his face, some his other self's, some Bernice's own dead, remorseless expression.

'Officer's issue,' said the younger Braxiatel softly, examining the gun he'd taken from her. 'Fifth Axis standard. Why, though, Bernice?' He didn't seem angry or amazed, just curious. 'Why kill him?'

'He wasn't really you,' she said. 'It had to be a trick.'

'And you knew that because...?'

She shrugged. 'You'd never sacrifice the Collection. It's too precious to you.'

'I see,' he said. 'Very good. Even so, you killed him in cold blood.'

'He...' she looked down again at the man she had killed. 'He was dangerous. He had to be. I... I think somewhere I'm a soldier again, Brax.'

'It's having strange effects on all of us, Bernice.'

'How did he get here, anyway?'

Braxiatel went over to the body, and began to check the pockets of the man's beige suit. He brushed splinters of broken mirror from the body.

'Not in a manner anyone can follow, now,' he said. 'I'll have him disposed of. Don't you worry. Forget all this, Bernice. Go home to Jason and Peter.'

'Peter?' she said. Suddenly she could feel something inside her. Pain and love and anxiety and hope, welling up when before she'd felt nothing at all. Memories swam into focus. 'He's... I remember him. He's my son.'

Brax stepped away from the dead body and came over to her. He held her face in his hands, and stared deep into her eyes. She had a son. She didn't have children. She was a soldier on another world,

shooting first and never even questioning, the Collection long since destroyed...

‘Bernice,’ said Brax, his voice echoing from a billion miles away. She gazed transfixed into his eyes.

‘The history machine,’ she said, feeling tears of desperation coming. ‘Forget all this,’ he told her. ‘Let it be someone else’s concern.’

‘Yes...’ she said, unable to resist him. ‘But Doggles. His scars... he’s connected to the —’

‘You’re no longer troubled,’ said Braxiatel. ‘Those other worlds, you can’t hear them. You’re only aware of the here and now.’

‘Yes...’ It was like being in a dream. A blissful dream.

‘You’re only aware of the here and now.’

‘Yes...’

‘Go home,’ he said, releasing her. ‘Go to sleep. Wake up and this will all be behind you.’

Bernice nodded, and without a word left his office, leaving Braxiatel to hide the dead man, as he had done all her questions. He looked down at his other self, the dead eyes staring back at them in amazement. Braxiatel shook his head.

‘I’ll think of something yet,’ he said.

The Ice Garden

By Jonathan Clements

The albedo rating was off the scale. Summerfield ignored the steady, flashing ring-cursor on the image of the bright planetoid, and punched in another sweep. The ship's computer beeped in annoyance. Half a second, and ten thousand calculations later, the same dot on the screen was circled again.

It didn't make sense. Summerfield rested her head on her hand, her palm patting gently on the rigid eyepatch. The target wasn't supposed to be like that. This was wrong.

There was something in her remaining eye, a dust-mote, a whirl of nothing. She tried without success to blink it away. On cue, her head began to throb beneath the repairs. Great, she thought with resignation, another migraine.

It shouldn't be like that. She knew this place, had had some association with it before her co-option, she was sure. The throbbing below her right temple grew worse, which was almost sure to confirm it. Somewhere in her memory, a synapse alteration was earnestly trying to mend itself.

Summerfield wrenched open the medicine cabinet, but the migraine pills were long gone. As were the antihistamines, any and all tranquillisers, the cortisone, and the precious many leaf. There was some cough syrup left. It would have to do. She unscrewed the cap and downed it as fast as she could.

Her ship had its orders. It drifted, engines off, all power sources shielded beneath the outer carbon shell, an innocent, windowless slab of black against the black of space, its orbit whipping it around the planetoid below.

Summerfield watched as the computer crunched through numbers. She didn't have to query it this time, it was having trouble with the orbit. The ship lurched through an apogee that was too fast even for the gravity dampers, sending the empty cough syrup bottle skittering across the floor.

Sticky, thought Summerfield. Someone would have to clean that up.

Pain sliced through the right side of her head. She was on the verge of remembering something, something best forgotten. Resolutely, she tried to focus her thoughts on her mission, away from forbidden areas. The pain subsided and she forced herself to stare at the overhead views.

Apart from the unnatural brightness, the planetoid below, make that

above, make that below, fitted all the data she had on the Collection. Her stealthed gunship was making an easy circuit every seven seconds, in an ellipse that would kill her without the dampers. Artificial gravity was her saviour, but the numbers on the screen were struggling to keep the micro-adjustments; the Collection was putting out much too much on the mass detectors for something that size. Either that piercingly bright dot was really a black hole, or...

Something else, thought Summerfield. The pain stabbed through her head again, but she remembered. The Collection had artificial gravity, too, it was the only way to keep everyone sane. She stifled a momentary whimper as the aching ramped right up, thumping through her skull like a hammer.

She swore at the absent battle computer. She should never have been sent on this mission. It was against policy to send Reassignments back to their places of origin. Forcing her to remember the very things she was supposed to forget was just... cruel.

She'd been there. She'd been there five years earlier, when the redirected comet had smashed into the dark side of the Collection with the force of a hundred megatons. She'd watched the first blossom of the explosion, the fountains of steam and rocks from what had once been a place fit for human habitation, now a wasteland of shattered fallout.

Of course, water. Thousands upon millions of tonnes of ice. In any normal meteoroid collision, it would have been thrown all over the star system. On the Collection, with its artificial atmospheric corona, it was dragged back down the gravity well.

Somewhere deep below the surface of the Collection, the gravity generators still worked, calling and reclaiming the hot steam until it cooled, until it altered its state and drifted back towards the shattered ground, fried and purified in the heat of impact.

It was snow.

The gunship shuddered into the atmosphere, its repulsor cutting in with only a few hundred metres to spare. Summerfield was used to hard landings, but strangely unprepared for the soft settling of the hull as it sunk into fast-melted ice below, its white cradle freezing again, its brief memory of water already forgotten.

The engines cut out. They were used to absolute zero. Mere water-ice didn't bother them.

She peered out through the hatch at a white wasteland.

Nippy, she thought. She rubbed absent-mindedly at her nose. She took a deep breath, and felt the discomfort increase. The cold was freezing any moisture on her nostril hairs. Very unladylike, she thought, to think such things. Even if her Conversion had allowed for any memories of the bad old days, she wasn't sure she'd recognise

where she was.

Her ship had gouged a long slice through a section of flat icy plain, coming to rest only a few hundred metres from the outer buildings. Faded signs announced Aldebaran antiquities, and a concession hall sponsored by a long forgotten plastics consortium, half the bold, solid typography lying in pieces on the ground.

Something shifted in one of the doorways.

Summerfield popped the casing for her binoculars, and held them up to her face. Deep down, part of her cursed the idiot who hadn't realised that monoculars would have weighed less. The right-hand side was useless.

Oh, no, part of her thought. A monocular was a telescope. A spyglass. An old fashioned pirate seeing-tube. Something almost made her smile, but then didn't. Her missing eye screwed up the 3D effect, and only half the targeting scope showed up, but she could still see at increased magnification, the unmistakeable blue fur. She was looking at a Killoran, and a big one at that. Whatever it was doing, it wasn't hanging around. She saw it loping off into the shadows, staying out of trouble. There was a distant Killoran howl, an atavistic throwback to their pre-civilised days, answered by hauntingly high responses in the distance.

She knew it was a danger sign, a sign to stay the hell away.

Good, she thought. One less thing to worry about.

Damn, her head was killing her. The pain was verging on the ridiculous. Perhaps it was the cold.

Nope. She knew what it was. This was what happened to good little bad girls when they wanted to be bad little good girls.

She smiled to herself. She wasn't sure what it meant, and didn't really want to think about it. That would only hurt all the more.

Her hand gave up. It lost its grip on the binoculars, and when she willed it to move, it just twitched with spastic tremors. The cold was deceptive. There was no wind on the Collection, no gusts to drive the message home to her nerve endings. It caused her body to play tricks, reacting to savagely dangerous cold the same way it might react to a brisk autumn day. Nippy.

It was more than nippy. Summerfield shivered and checked the thermometer. It was thirty below and night was on its way. An old crew jumper and some leggings weren't going to cut it, she would need some sort of environmental protection or she was going to freeze to death.

Reluctantly, seeing it as a temporary admission of defeat, she clambered back inside the gunship. As the inner lock cycled back open, the heat hit her in a single crashing wave. Subzero to room temperature in one second was a fast learning curve. She shivered

involuntarily as her confused pores began sweating.

Summerfield didn't have time to waste. She programmed the grower to push out a couple of snowshoes, and decided to improvise with her clothes.

Hoping there wasn't a space walk any time in her near future, she tugged the inner lining out of an EVA suit. It yielded an all-over body stocking, woven from heat-preserving polypropylenes, criss-crossed with heating/cooling tubes, input and output sockets, and the occasional lightning insignia, bright and pristine from being tucked away out of sight in spacesuit underwear for half a decade.

It would have to do.

Sod's Law: the grower pushed out two items that looked more like fat skis, then coughed its last.

The skis weren't for pirouetting or slalomming. They were far more functional than that. Each spread Summerfield's body weight over an area a hand-span wide and two metres long. Without them, she would plunge waste deep in the snowdrift with each step she took. But with them, she could shuffle, slowly but surely, on the surface, her tracks barely ankle deep. After a while, Summerfield got into the swing of it. A sharp pain told her she was remembering something, some kind of training from the past, but she shook it away. She shifted her weight onto first one, then the other foot, allowing her feet to slide. Even if she only slid a little way with each footstep, it was still a little further than she didn't have to walk.

Her ears were playing tricks on her. Her skis creaked and popped on the snow. Just as her mass was spread over a wider ground area, so was her noise. On a dozen occasions, she whirled round, thinking that someone was coming up behind her, but she was alone, the phantom sounds generated by the far end of a ski scraping on a rock or fragment she'd already left behind her.

Eventually, she left the snow behind, the skis clattering onto hard surfaces of marble, brick and cracked tile, shielded from snowfall by the shadows of ruined buildings. She kicked the skis away from her feet and shoved them upright in a snowdrift.

Remember where we parked, she thought grimly. She looked back at the squat wedge of her gunship, deceptively far away on the close horizon. She didn't relish the trip back.

The Collection was a mess. Tremors and aftershocks had toppled buildings, and fires in libraries were never going to be pleasant. Add to that untold months of snowfall, and it was a wasteland, once-buried artefacts brought here from all over the universe, now half-buried again.

Summerfield liked it, in its weird little way. She liked the quiet, and

she liked the fact that she wasn't picking her way across mile after mile of broken glass like she'd had to once on Byzantia. Skyscrapers were all very fun, until someone let off a sonic bomb and thousands of square miles of glass tumbled into the narrow streets.

Someone?

Come to think of it, it had been her.

Typical me.

She waited for the characteristic thud of a memory warning, but her head remained at ease for once. Must have been a job she carried out post-Conversion.

She heard another whisper of ice. Ignored it. Until her eye widened in surprise and she dropped to the ground. She wasn't wearing the skis any more. If she heard something, it was because something was there.

There it was again: a solid, twisting squeak of something driving into the crust of snow and deep into it. Something heavy was walking nearby, and it was close enough to her that its feet were hitting rock, not ice.

Summerfield fumbled on her belt for her pistol, her hands thick and unwieldy beneath the gloves. She stared down at the Brimmicombe .45 in her hand and faced facts: if she was going to get her finger behind the guard and on to the trigger, she was going to have to take a glove off.

The cold stung her face like a rebuke. She'd leave them on for now. Last thing she needed was her fingers frostbitten and useless. She stayed prone, craning her neck for some sight of the approaching creature, but there was still nothing to go on but sound. The heavy footfalls continued, long whooshes slamming into the snow, then the barest of pauses, then another step. It sounded bipedal, roughly human-sized from the time between steps, but whatever it was wearing was heavy. Summerfield shivered in spite of the guaranteed protection of her environment suit, and couldn't say that she blamed him. If he was wearing so much clothing he looked like a yeti, he might stand a chance of keeping warm in this weather.

Summerfield kept low, sidling against the wall, her gun still clutched in her gloved hand. Without her finger on the trigger, it was next to useless, but she hung onto it for moral support.

Damn, she hoped it wasn't a yeti.

It took a while for her to confirm the footsteps were getting closer. After a monotonous minute, her quarry was close enough for her to hear it breathing. At least, that's what she hoped it was. Each intake was an overlong, twenty-second hiss, the exhalation an immediate backblast, each separated from the other by an artificial glottal stop.

It had breathing apparatus. Whatever it was, it was in an

environment suit, and it was wearing one because it needed to.

Summerfield was pleased. No offence to anyone she had to kill, but she preferred it when they couldn't put up a fight. There was no real difference between a sniper rifle long distance, a bomb or a stab in the back. As long as they worked, all the operative needed to know was which would present the least difficulty for her.

Killing was easy, really. That's what Colonel Jones always said, and Summerfield agreed. Summerfield liked it that way. Summerfield wasn't heartless enough for torture. Her ways of getting information involved empathising with an interviewee. By the time she was ready to ask questions, she'd got too friendly, too involved. But killing, killing was easy.

And stealing. Stealing was something Summerfield could do. Although it made her head throb, she revelled in a memory she shouldn't recall, of Jones telling her that she'd always been good at digging up things for her bosses, even back before her Conversion, when the bosses were...

She stifled a cry as the headache came back with a vengeance, a vicious needling from the cold, hard derm under her eyepatch, obliquely right the way across her skull.

The footfalls stopped. It had heard her.

She raised her head slightly, peering with her good eye over a crest of ice.

The axe just missed her head.

Chunky, limned with the friendly bright red of easy identification In Case of Fire, it had become a missile in the hands of her new adversary. It whooshed past her blind side and landed with a soft crumple somewhere in the snow.

She clambered to her feet, catching a glimpse of her assailant, a ludicrous humanoid figure, like an old-fashioned diving suit, heavy pressure-walls holding in something that did not belong on the Collection.

She darted behind the next corner, pulling off her glove, fumbling for the pistol. She didn't make a habit of running around with a round in the chamber; that would be pushing her luck. She pulled back the slide, her hand slipping on the cold metal on the first try. A bullet chunked into place and she was ready.

The footfalls were approaching faster now, getting louder, the breaths still a misleading, lazy rhythm. But the heavy metal steps were faster now, ever quicker, trotting almost.

Damn it, she thought.

She darted back to face it, jerking her finger on the trigger. You were supposed to squeeze. Breath. Aim. Slack. Squeeze. Like she'd been taught. Silly girl. Typical.

The clanking pressure suit lurched ever closer. Summerfield could make out its exoskeleton: loops of high-order memory metal disappearing into fusion pistons. With kit like that, it could probably run faster than her, if it felt like it.

She squeezed off another shot, unhappily noting how it pinged off the heavy metal suit. Summerfield ran into the next building, secretly grateful for the smashed cabinets and fallen Chinese bronzes, her boots squeaking comically on the dark marble floor. Screams of tortured metal and the clatter of dislodged artefacts told her that the creature had chased her inside.

There was a pause in the footsteps, and the hiss as new gears operated the suit. A puppet that worked itself, she thought, how quaint.

Realising what the change in noise might mean, she half-dropped, half-tripped to the ground. A Zhou-dynasty bronze drinking flagon shot through the space she had suddenly vacated, mashing itself into scrap on the wall behind her.

Summerfield gingerly poked her head above a ruined cabinet, seeing her chance. The creature was reaching down to pick up another thing to throw. In the dark of the museum chamber, she saw something glowing in the visor.

Now she knew.

She saw it clearly through the glass dome where a human head should have been. It was luminous, like a jellyfish, crammed into the suit for pressure's sake. A huge gas-ball creature from a Jupiter-like world, stuffed unceremoniously into a biped's environment suit, a few of its eyes poking up into the dome to get its bearings. No wonder it needed the exoskeleton to move around.

She aimed as carefully as she could with the pistol's rudimentary sights. The gun kicked in her cold hand, and an errant bullet caromed off what should have been a shoulder.

The figure in the metal suit sprang to its feet faster than Summerfield expected. It was warming up, that was for sure. Or maybe it realised she was playing for keeps. It raised back an arm, ready to hurl a fragment of a large Ming dynasty serving dish. Summerfield's next shot took out a forearm gear, the pent-up energy of the exoskeleton shooting forth in a jet of super-hot steam. The arm halted mid-throw, stuck in an upraised position. It was a moment of truth. Summerfield realised that the armour was so much dead weight if she shot away the gears. Her assailant must have worked that out, too. It didn't matter where they stood, as friends or enemies, attackers or defenders, they both realised that only one option was left.

The creature in the suit charged right at her, leaping with unnatural speed as the remaining pistons cranked into overdrive.

Suppressing an involuntary yell of surprise and fear, Summerfield pulled repeatedly on the trigger, her rounds pinging off the fast-approaching armour. She forced herself to think rationally, to think logically about what she had to do, to take careful aim despite every muscle in her body screaming at her to run, to sight oh-so-carefully at the piston on the charging figure's hips, to squeeze off one well-placed round.

With a second hiss of escaping steam, the piston ruptured, jamming the attacker's leg mid-stride, dragging it off-course. It hopped noisily on the marble floor, its other leg cracking great dents into the stone.

Summerfield was close enough for a head shot, close enough to crack the visor and end it all for the jellyfish inside. But something made her stop. Instead, she calmly shot out the other leg-piston, watching with a satisfied air as it locked.

The metal figure teetered, shifting its weight desperately, standing upright, then leaning forward as it tried to maintain its balance. But it was going over, and not before time, mere inches from its target.

Summerfield shook her head cynically: the bigger they come, and all that.

It fell to the ground with the loudest crash so far, the only sound in the room the continued wheezing of the respirator. Summerfield's smile was short-lived, as the remaining operable arm smashed down upon her foot.

Her nerves weren't working right in the cold. Her initial reaction was the anguished ouch of a stubbed toe. It was only as she fell that she felt the terrifying dampness of crushed bones and seeping blood.

Summerfield said something rude, gasping in new agony, her gun-hand coming to bear of its own accord, firing off a vengeful round at her attacker's dome-like visor. It cracked, audibly, but didn't shatter. She dragged herself up the staircase leaning heavily on the sturdy banister. Below her, the figure in the metal suit flailed its arm impotently against the floor. For a moment, it almost looked like a pinned wrestler conceding defeat. Summerfield's smashed foot trailed behind her. She paused on the top step to tease off her boot, sobbing involuntarily as it upended and let loose a good cupful of blood. She tore off her remaining glove to give her hand some purchase, threading off her belt to make a tourniquet round her calf. It would do, for now. She'd had worse.

She ran her fingers through her matted hair, accidentally brushing the tough plastic patch that held part of her brain in. By hell, she'd had worse!

There was a noise behind her. She spun, cursing her ruined foot, her gun held out in front of her, her fevered mind clinging to the notion that there were still some rounds left. Three, she thought. Maybe four.

She really ought to remember to count them out. Typical.

‘Don’t shoot!’ said a man’s voice.

The voice was familiar enough to cause Summerfield another headache.

‘Come out here where I can see you!’ she yelled.

A figure shambled into view, the remnants of a suit visible under several woolly jumpers, and an incongruous cloak fashioned from what had once been a Persian carpet. His hands were raised conspicuously over his head. Several months of beard obscured much of his face.

‘I see you’ve made friends with Hass!’ he said, his eyes twinkling.

As if in response, there was the distant sound of a metal fist ringing unhappily against unyielding stone.

‘He doesn’t like people on his land you see,’ said the man. ‘Don’t take it personally.’ He caught sight of her bloody foot. ‘Ooh,’ he added. ‘That must sting.’

‘I’ve got a mender back on my ship,’ said Summerfield.

‘Of course you have,’ said the man. ‘Look, take whatever you want,’ he said through the greying Santa Claus whiskers. ‘Just take it and go. But somehow I doubt that —’ He stopped, peering in wide-eyed surprise at her.

‘Benny?’ he breathed.

Her eyes shook momentarily from the pain.

‘Benny! It’s me, Braxiatel,’ he said. ‘Don’t you remember?’

He stared a moment too long at her blind side.

‘What in the world did they do to you?’ he whispered, half to himself. He reached out to touch her head, but she stepped back in revulsion.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ Summerfield spat.

‘A goodbye kiss from your husband, I take it,’ said Braxiatel. ‘Looks like it was memorable.’

Her blind side throbbed again with suppressed memory. She decided to shoot this man and get on with her mission.

At first she blamed the cold. Her bloodless, cramped hand, spasming in the low temperature. But she knew it was something else. The way he looked at her.

Summerfield couldn’t do it. No matter how she willed her finger to pull on the trigger, it wouldn’t do it.

The man, Braxiatel, could not resist a smile.

‘See, Benny,’ he said. ‘You’re still there. Something of you is still there, under that uniform and those scars.’

Summerfield’s eye narrowed, trying to focus past the pain. Her gun-hand shook, but she still couldn’t do it.

‘Are you really here on behalf of the Axis?’ said Braxiatel gently.

‘This is none of your concern,’ growled Summerfield. ‘Couldn’t he see that she had a mission to perform? Now what was it again? Summerfield railed in secret misery at her failing memory. ‘I can still monitor the sub-space bands from here,’ said Braxiatel. ‘I haven’t heard any deployments in this sector.’

‘How would you know?’ said Summerfield.

‘We’ve already been dealt with here,’ said Braxiatel wryly. ‘The Collection is old news. The Occupation pulled out years ago, as soon as they’d quashed our resistance. Your frontlines are way past us now. Your outposts are on Amaterasu, out beyond Compass Ghost. The battle at Cahokia? The blockade around the Markland cluster? That’s way away from here.’

‘I don’t need a lecture on military history from—’

‘Don’t you?’

‘Shut up!’

‘You’re looking for something, Benny.’

‘Of course I am!’

‘But it’s not for Them,’ said Braxiatel, his mouth hardening. ‘It’s for you.’

Summerfield’s gun went off, the bullet thudding harmlessly into one of the thick leather-bound tomes on the wall. The slide jammed in the open position, revealing no more rounds left. Summerfield turned from Braxiatel, half-running from the room, limping on the heel of her injured foot.

‘You want the garden!’ shouted Braxiatel after her. ‘Look in the garden, then you’ll see!’

Summerfield knew he was right, hated him for it even as she struggled through the collapsed ruin of the Martian galleries. She was alone on the staircase that wound into the central atrium, slowing only momentarily to clamber over the fallen statue of a forgotten deity, blocking the stairs as one final act of godlike potency. She dropped back to the stairs, their marble cracked and dull, and felt the chill again as she reached the ground floor.

The great doors of the main entrance were missing, the nearby floor scattered with axed shards. Someone had cut them up for firewood or some other improvised purpose, leaving the main chamber open to the elements. Snowdrifts several feet high snaked into the main hall. Beyond them, Summerfield saw the flat icy plain that had once been something else.

Braxiatel peered through the shards of glass that still jutted from what had once been his window, watching the figure of Summerfield scurry across the ruined garden. She was far enough away. Even if she came back for him, it was going to take her long minutes to find him. He

turned back to the deceptively small cylinder on his desk, surrounded by discarded wires and diodes, the chunks of plastic explosive nestling innocently against the casing.

This would have to do, he mused, lifting the bomb in his hand. Attached to the gravity generators, at the right place, at the right time, it might just be enough. He looked up at the cracked, foggy mirror that still hung off-kilter on his wall. 'This had better work,' he said to his reflection.

With that, he let the heavy Persian-rug cape fall, and started jogging for the downward stairwell. It was a long way to the core, and there was no telling what Summerfield might do.

Down below in the garden, Summerfield had other things on her mind. She grabbed at the fallen shovel, its shaft shockingly cold against her hands. She hacked with it into the icy crust, flinging back impacted snow. Beneath, the hardened ice was blue, not white, shining in the light of the Collection's sun. Her chest heaving with the effort, Summerfield swung the shovel as if it were a pickaxe, smashing the blade edge-first into the hard layer.

Her body settled into rhythm of swing, shovel and heft, her mind pulsing with the forbidden memories of old Killoran work-gang songs. She lost her footing, realised that her improvised tourniquet had somehow come loose, and that her blood was ebbing into the ice garden.

Black fog crept into the edges of her vision, her body tingling warm with the effort, sweating beneath the body stocking despite the cold outside. The shivers were uncontrollable now, hampering her efforts at digging, losing every second or third swing as a futile slap against the ground.

Yes, the ground, she'd struck dirt, now hardened by years of cold, but she had found the place where she was supposed to look. Shock leapt through her arms as the shovel met an immovable object. She'd hit a stone slab.

Typical me, she thought, causing waves of pain to slice through her head. It was too much for her. She dropped to her knees, the shovel forgotten, scraping at the slab, clearing it, scooping icy chunks aside, the nerve endings in her hands alive with conspicuous pain, urging her to stop and get in the warm before frost bit too deep. There was blood on her hands, and blood on her cheeks, bloody tears running down from her eyes.

Dimly, some part of her old self registered the fact that she'd pushed too far, and that the Axis programming had gone into overload. Tears of blood were not a good sign, not with all the suturing underneath her skull.

Her numb hands found depressions in the slab, the indentations of letters, something carved across it.

This was it, she thought, this was the thing she had defied them to find. This was that missing piece of herself that she had to see.

Braxiatel was right. There was no mission. The Collection was earmarked for demolition. This was strictly personal, though she couldn't remember why.

Now little more than bloodied, frozen extremities, her hands uncovered an entire word. Summerfield saw it, and knew, and understood, what she had been and what she had lost, even as the blackness rose up to fill her sight, and she slumped in the snow, the last of her red tears freezing on a single word carved in the slab beneath her.

Peter.

Family Man

By Ian Mond

Now

The wedding is small, low-key, nothing like the last time she married. Peter, so grown up now, gives her away. He seems reconciled to it now, but Braxiatel knows there are problems. Peter's not the only one to still hold a grudge.

Jason gets a mention in the speeches. They raise their glasses and Bernice, grey-haired now, radiant in late middle age, thanks them all. She insisted on making a speech, she says. It's important Doggles gets used to the idea he doesn't speak for her. People laugh. Yes, they're equals. This marriage is going to be okay.

Before she continues, as the laughing dies down, Bernice looks over the assembled guests. And she sees him. Braxiatel, lurking at the back, happy not to be seen. Another Braxiatel. Not the one at the top table beside her.

He could have snuck away after that, but he knows that wouldn't be fair. So he waits for her, in the background, after the cake-cutting and the first dance and all the other rituals done out of duty and a fear of breaking the spell.

'You're him from the future?' she says, handing him a glass of champagne. 'Not exactly,' he says. 'Why, do I look so old?'

'Tired,' she said. 'I assume you've a warning or something?' A horrible thought struck her. 'I am all right marrying him, aren't I?'

Braxiatel raised his glass to her. 'Of course you are, Bernice. I'm just passing through. Wanted a word with the other one of me. That's all. Don't worry. Really.'

She let herself believe him, the smile coming slowly to her face. 'So many people were against us,' she said. 'Bev and Adrian haven't even sent a card.'

'The explosion was an accident,' said Braxiatel. 'Doggles couldn't have known. He couldn't have done any different.' But there was something in her expression. What is it, Bernice?

'He was part of the machine,' she said. 'He told me, right afterwards. The Axis wanted the machines for strategic purposes, for quickly accessing information. So each one of them was going to be linked to its owner.' She shook her head sadly. He's so scarred, inside and outside. And he was part of it... Brax? Brax, what is it?'

He was staring at her, wide-eyed. 'I have to get back,' he said. 'There's something I must do...' He drank the champagne down in one

gulp, then leant Forward and kissed Bernice on the cheek. She was quite brilliantly astonished, and even lost for words. He'd have to remember that one in future.

'Thank you, Bernice. And tell my other self .. Well, that he's not to worry.'

And with that he hurried off back to the entrance hall, the one with the vast, antique mirror.

* * *

Then

I'm so out of it that I take the holo-call without thinking.

'Ben?'

Hearing my name brings everything into sharp relief. My pigsty of a room: the bed unmade, clothes thrown across the floor, bedside table weighed down by vid-tablets and old-fashioned books. And floating above the bed the holographic head of a familiar old man.

'Ben... I need to speak —'

I blink a few times, not believing what I'm seeing. Then the truth dawns and I can't help myself, exploding into a gale of manic laughter. I fall to my knees and slam my fists against the threadbare carpet, tears streaming down my face. The old man is watching me, silent and patient.

Oh, shit, how much I've hated that expression. That's how he'd look at you when you asked a silly question, or didn't understand something he was saying, or was disappointed when you came tenth at the science fête. No anger, no yelling; just that patronising expression, as if he never expected anything better from someone so deficient.

Caroline never received that look. But then Caroline never asked stupid questions, never needed to have anything explained to her twice and always, always came first at the science fête.

So I laugh. Because having him here, on this day, of all days, has to be the funniest joke in the universe.

My stomach aches, my face is wet with tears, my body trembles and, after what seems like forever but is probably only minutes, the chuckles die down. I take a deep breath and look up at the calm, collected face of my father and I tell him, in no uncertain terms, to go to hell.

'Ben, we need to speak.'

The anger, always lurking beneath the giggles, wells up inside me. 'You've had ten years.'

My father shakes his head. 'We need to put that behind us, there are more —'

'DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT HAPPENED TODAY?'

'Yes,' he says. 'And I'm sorry for your loss.'

‘Sorry for my loss...’ I shake my head; he’s always been a cold, emotionless bastard. ‘She was your wife!’

‘Please, Ben, I need you to calm down.’

I pick up a book from my bedside table and throw it savagely at my father. The book passes through the hologram, slamming into the wardrobe hard enough to make a dent.

That patronising expression returns. He’s so damn lucky that he’s not actually here. The horrible things I’d do to him.

‘Another time,’ he says sadly.

And the face of my father, Irving Braxiatel, vanishes from my bedroom.

* * *

Now

Reality snapped into place.

Irving Braxiatel took the deepest, longest, sweetest breath of all his lives.

As he had hoped, he’d arrived back in his office at the precise moment when he and the Martian Sset had been discussing ancient artefacts.

The Martian was peering at him. ‘What issss it?’

In the background, Irving heard a bell chime.

He leapt to his feet and ran out of his office.

Then

I visit my sister’s Memory Chamber for the last time.

I haven’t been here for five years. The thing is, and Goddess forgive me for saying it, I wasn’t actually fond of my sister. It wasn’t that I didn’t love her; I just didn’t like her as a person. She was so cold, distant and detached. Everything was a scientific experiment for her, something to be analysed and hypothesised over.

Just like Dad.

Inside the chamber, holograms of my sister vie for attention. There she is playing with her first microscope; there she is being awarded the Davies Scholarship for the Most Exciting Young Talent; there she is with her co-workers at the Wrensmen Technical Institute on the 4th Colony Dome. This was my sister. A scientist, doing the things she enjoyed most.

Just like Dad.

At the centre of the Chamber there is a single, static hologram of Caroline. She is dressed in a sleeveless evening gown, her long black hair falling across her right shoulder. She looks absolutely gorgeous. The picture was taken a few months before she died. She’d been invited to a party being held by the Board of the Technical Institute. I distinctly remember her not wanting to go, hating the idea of having

to dress up. But Dad convinced her; she always, always listened to him.

I stare into her glittering brown eyes. The one part of her that was always alive and vibrant, sparking with intelligence. You just knew a whole sweep of zany ideas flickered backward and forward behind those eyes.

‘Hi, Caroline,’ I say. Her thin smile doesn’t grow any wider. I doubt it would have even if she were alive.

‘I thought you should know that Mum died,’ I say. ‘We buried her today. She... she... her internals collapsed from a virulent case of Mendoza. Shit, Caroline, it was so damn quick...’ I close my eyes and try unsuccessfully to block images of my mother, frail and withered like old fruit, a multitude of coloured tubes sticking out of her body.

‘Dad called me the other day... the day mum died actually. I wanted to hurt him so bad, you know, but...’ I swallow, there are tears welling up in my eyes. ‘Why is he the only family I have left now?’ I take a deep breath. ‘Anyway, gotta go, big sister... I...’ My voice trails off; I’ve run out of things to say.

* * *

He’s standing outside waiting for me.

I haven’t seen my father in the flesh for ten years — not since Caroline’s suicide. Back then, he was a tall imposing figure, with his aquiline nose and his swept-back hair and his penetrating eyes. Whenever he entered a room, everyone’s attention would focus on him. People would actually hang off his every word, as if he were someone worthy of respect.

When I see him, the first thing I want to do is punch him. I want to break through that calm exterior, I want to make him scream in pain, I want to see him fall to his knees and beg forgiveness.

But the man standing in the blinding white corridor of the Memory Institute is not the same man who walked out on his wife and son. Anything that was ever striking and impressive about my father has been stripped away. What remains is a stooped, wrinkled old man wearing a baggy white shirt and brown slacks. His badly scuffed black brogues remind me of ancient fossils.

And he smells.

I hadn’t been aware of this when he’d contacted me the other day. Oh, yeah, I noticed he was older, crows feet around the eyes and all that, but not this, never this bad.

And the first thought that comes into my mind is —
— he’s dying of Mendoza.

‘Goddess... Dad...’

‘I’m sorry for intruding, Ben, but I really need to talk to you.’

Any thought of decking my father has vanished. ‘Dad, you look

terrible.'

He smiles, and I can see he's lost a lot of his teeth. 'Thank you, Ben.'

I remember where we're standing and a fraction of the anger returns. 'You could at least pay your respects.' I say, pointing at Caroline's Memory Chamber.

'I do, son,' Dad says. 'Since my arrival I've been coming here every day.'

That shuts me up. When I next speak, I sound sheepish, childish. 'I want to set up one for Mum.'

'We can talk about that.'

We find a cafe nearby. I order a Stomeroff with cream; my father asks for a glass of water.

If someone had told me last week that I would be sitting in a cafe, in Dome 3, drinking a coffee with my Dad, I'd have had that person committed.

I break the silence. 'I've enrolled.'

Dad sips at his water, a slight tremble to his right hand.

'In university?'

'No, Dad, I'm joining the Coalition.'

A shadow passes across my father's face. 'You're not a fighter, Ben.'

'Someone has to stop the Axis, Dad. They're looking for volunteers and with Mum gone... well, there was nothing keeping me back.'

'When do you ship off?'

'I leave for training in six weeks.' My father carefully puts down his glass of water. 'I don't have much time, do I?'

The waitress brings my Stomeroff. She smiles at me, but there's a concerned expression on her face when she glances at Dad. She's not the only one. 'You had ten years,' I say.

'Yes...'

I add three sugars to the Stomeroff. 'Dad, what's all this about? And what's wrong with you? Is it... is it...'

'Mendoza? No, not Mendoza.'

'Then what? Why the sudden appearance?'

My father stares into his glass of water. 'Did you blame me for Caroline's death?'

I pause. Did I want to be having this discussion now? Yes, of course I bloody well did. I'd been fantasising about what I'd say to my father if I ever had the chance for the last ten years. But in my dreams, he was still the Irving I remembered, except I was the bigshot, I was the one in control; I was the one who was right.

'Of course I blame you. But that shouldn't come as much of a surprise. I was only 16, I had no idea what was going on and no one was there to explain it to me. One day I have a father and a sister, the next day one of you is dead and the other has run off. And Mum is a

shadow of her vibrant, happy self. So yeah, it was piss easy to blame you.'

Now he looks up and I can see something in his eyes that I've never ever seen before. Uncertainty. 'I need... I want to get to know you. Maybe then you'll understand...'

'Dad, I'm —'

'Not for six weeks!' My father shouting is like a slap in the face. 'Give me six weeks, Ben. Please.'

I've hated him for ten years.

But I'm desperate to know why he ruined our family.

Now

Brax realised he was running out of time.

He'd hoped for six or seven hours to set everything right. Enough time to convince those in the gardens of what he needed to do. But as he raced down the varied corridors of the Collection, he knew he'd have less than two hours to snap reality back into place.

All around him Possibility was trying to reassert itself. He could feel it tug on him, trying to reshape him in its image.

Today we'll have a world where Irving's gone totally insane... or how about a world where Irving has been transformed into a woman... or how about a world where Irving never existed... or how about a world where Irving is a human with a wife and two kids.

When he reached the gardens he could feel the pull of Possibility dissipate. For the moment this was the eye of the storm, and at the centre of it all Doggles's history machine. Bernice was the first to notice him. Like everyone else, she seemed... bewildered, confused... as if she'd just woken from a deep sleep. Brax wondered how much she remembered. Hopefully very little; he didn't have time to psychoanalyse a garden full of people.

'Brax... I...' Bernice was standing beside what remained of the history machine. The metal sphere with its antiquated screen twisted and warped. And yet it was still bleeding white light.

Possibility.

'Bernice. Stand away from the machine.'

All eyes turned on Brax as he strode toward the stage. Bernice met him halfway. He could tell immediately she was frightened. She wasn't alone.

'What's going on?' Bernice whispered in his ear.

Brax didn't have time for explanations, but he knew he'd have to offer Bernice something. 'You remember I told you that Adrian was shoring up our defences.'

'Vaguely,' Bernice said. 'That conversation feels like it happened a lifetime ago.'

‘Yes, well, the method I employed, with Adrian’s help, was to extend the shields of my... ship.’

‘Your ship,’ Bernice whispered and then her eyes widened as the implications dawned on her. ‘You’ve taken the Collection outside of time and space. No wonder the stupid machine doesn’t work, there’s no history for it to see! How could you be so bloody careless?’

Brax pursed his lips. ‘Do you honestly believe I would have allowed Doggles and his machine on my Collection if I thought there was a chance something like this could have happened?’

‘I don’t want to break the news to you, Brax old chum, but something like this, whatever the hell this bloody well is, has happened!’ Bernice was shouting now, and the bewildered crowd was staring in their direction.

Brax grabbed Bernice by the shoulders, a move that caught her completely off guard. She struggled to break his hold, but he held her firm. ‘Listen to me, Benny,’ he hissed. ‘I freely admit that my arrogance got the better of me this time. But believe me when I say that I have paid for my sins. All of you are so lucky, so privileged to be born with such primitive psyches. Even now you only have a faint recollection of all the possibilities you witnessed. But I remember everything!’

‘I don’t understand.’

Brax drew closer to her. ‘The machine has caused a feedback loop, one I thought I could contain by modifying the shields. Instead it split our reality into a thousand, million possibilities. All of us, everyone in the Collection, has floated between each of these possibilities like ghosts in the machine.’

Bernice closed her eyes. ‘I... I think I remember bits and pieces... some of it so surreal.’

‘Be thankful for that, Bernice. Only I had the mental and psychological faculties to interact with each possibility. And every time I stepped over the threshold, I remembered everything.’ Brax tapped his forehead. ‘All these Irving Braxiatels in my head, Bernice, each possibility fighting to survive, each one fighting to become the dominant personality.’

‘Shit,’ was all Bernice could say.

‘Only the desire to bring everything back to normal has stopped me from going insane. But I’m running out of time Bernice, we’re all running out of time. The effect of the machine is beginning to spread beyond the confines of the Collection. History is changing.’

Brax released Bernice and pointed to a tall figure standing toward the back of the crowd. ‘What do you see?’ He whispered.

‘All I see is Hass.’

‘Don’t you find it odd that Hass is wearing a Martian cold-suit?’

‘Shouldn’t he be?’

‘Look closer.’

Bernice took a few steps forward and then stiffened. When she turned back to Brax all the colour had drained from her face. ‘He’s human,’ she whispered. ‘Hass is human!’

‘I can sense history changing, Bernice. I can feel the threads that bind the universe together unravel and fray and I can actually see the apocalypse on the horizon.’ Brax took a deep breath. He needed so badly for her to understand him. ‘I’m so very tired, Bernice. I was never built for this sort of caper; I’ve never been a hero. But now that I do have to get my hands dirty, I need to know that you trust me, that you’ll support me, that you’ll be there for me.’

Bernice nodded. ‘Yes, of course.’

Brax smiled. ‘I’ve bought us some time. Help me save the universe.’

Then

We meet every night in a small pub near my apartment.

I decide to take things easy with Dad. Partly because he’d clam up if I interrogated him, but mainly because he looks like death with a heartbeat. His clothes are falling apart, he smells horrible and sometimes I catch him stripping flakes of skin from his hands. If Dad had been on his own, Charlie the bartender would have shown him the door.

The worst thing is he refuses to tell me what’s wrong with him. He promises it’s not Mendoza but that doesn’t reassure me. There are plenty of shitty diseases out there that can reduce healthy people to corpses.

He wants to know about me. I’m not sure I should tell him; isn’t he the one who should be answering my questions? But I find I can’t help myself. Despite his illness, Dad’s eyes still have that mesmeric pull.

So over the first few nights I tell him about life with Mum, about how I graduated from school with average marks, how I fell out of university after only three semesters, how I got a job as a clerk for the Immigration Office on Dome 2. ‘I’ve been there for eight years,’ I say. ‘In some ways I’m glad the war’s come along; it breaks the monotony of my job.’ Dad doesn’t comment.

I tell him about Jennifer — my one and only girlfriend and, I suppose, my one true love. Of all the things I speak about, Dad finds this the most interesting. I tell him how good we were together, how we loved each other, how we never wanted to be apart. And as I speak I see a smile creep across my Dad’s face. I never thought he’d be interested in my love life.

‘What happened to Jennifer?’ he asks.

‘In the end we just didn’t work out. She saw so much potential in

me, potential I was never willing to realise. I think she became frustrated and bored. I don't blame her. She's with someone else now.'

Dad touches my hand. It's the most fatherly thing he's ever done.

After a week of doing most of the talking, I decide to question my father.

'Where did you go, Dad?'

He seems reluctant to answer. 'Offworld.'

'Where?'

'Here and there.'

Why did he have to be so bloody cryptic? 'Dad, this isn't fair. I can see you're sick, and I don't want to interrogate you, but don't you think I deserve some answers?'

'Can't the past remain the past, Ben? Can't we just be father and son?'

'Bit late for that.'

'I know,' Dad whispers. 'I should never have left.'

I'm stunned by this admission of guilt. In the 16 years I'd known Irving Braxiatel, I'd never known him admit he was wrong, about anything.

'Where did you go?'

Dad licks dry, cracked lips. 'I blamed myself for Caroline's death and I knew your mother felt the same way. She and Caroline had never seen eye to eye; there'd always been a coldness between them. And your mother blamed that state of affairs on me.'

'Was she right to blame you?'

'Yes,' Dad says softly. 'Caroline had so much potential and I knew she could become one of the greatest scientists of our age. So I pushed her and I pushed her and I pushed her.'

'And that's why she killed herself.'

'Not at all. Your sister was always up to the task. And she adored every challenge I threw at her. She was brilliant. But by bringing out the best in her I drove a wedge between Caroline and your mother. Jane had every right to blame me.'

'So where did you go?'

'Many different places... I was looking... looking for a way to redeem myself.'

'I don't understand.'

Dad's smile is so very sad. 'I know.' And he refused to say any more on the subject.

* * *

Over the next few weeks I try to break through my father's defences, but he won't budge. I know he's hiding something huge, something that's tied into his illness and the death of Caroline.

Some nights I won't bring up the subject and we talk about

mundane stuff—mostly the war. According to reports, the Axis is making huge strides, blowing away any Coalition forces that come their way. They seem unstoppable and at their present rate of attack they will hit the colony in just over two months.

Dad never seems that interested. To him the war is just an annoying fly that won't go away.

Some nights I can't contain my fury and I lash out at Dad. I blame him for everything bad that's happened in my life: my dead-end job, breaking up with Jennifer, Mum's death. He just takes it all on the chin.

And some nights... some nights I beg him to tell me.

But he holds firm, never utters a word.

Until the night before I leave for training.

Now

He had their undivided attention.

'We have very little time, so I'll be quick and to the point.' His voice was strong and confident. 'I understand and appreciate how confused and frightened you must all be feeling. All those jumbled memories in your head, a good many of which are contradictory. But if you listen to me and trust me then I can make the fear, the confusion and the pain go away. I promise to make everything better.'

In their eyes he could see they believed him.

'The machine behind me is the cause of all our problems. It has fractured reality and, unless we find a way to shut it down, reality will buckle under the strain. Fortunately, I have a solution; I've discovered a way to turn the machine off.'

'The gardens we stand in now are not real. They are in fact an interface, a stable point linking reality with the next possibility. As you can see for yourself, the interface is fragile; the next Possibility will soon overwhelm us.'

For a brief moment he saw a sneak peak into the next possibility, a place where the Collection had been overrun by an Ancient Evil: something dark and amorphous and definitely unfriendly.

'I've created this interface to give us the precious minutes we need to power down the machine.' Brax turned to the man cowering amongst the warped ruins of his precious invention. 'What we need to do is this: sever the link between the machine and its user.'

His eyes met with Doggles.

A moment of understanding.

Doggles turned to the audience, screaming out in terror. 'You can't let him KILL ME!'

* * *

Then

We don't go to the pub that night because of Dad's physical appearance. His body is covered with blood blisters and sores. Most of them are dry and scabby, but every so often, if he moves suddenly, a blister will burst open, leaking thin red blood.

So we go to my apartment. And, over a cup of tea, my father tells me his story.

Dad's working late one night in his study when he hears someone whisper his name. At first he thinks it's Jane calling him to bed but then he hears the voice again and realises it's coming from the bottom drawer of his desk.

More curious than frightened, he opens the drawer and discovers, jumbled amongst some old papers, a hand mirror; an antique from his wife's side of the family.

He takes the mirror from the drawer and stares at his reflection. Wrinkles are beginning to make their steady march across his face and for the first time in his life my father realises he's running out of time, that his most productive years as a scientist are beginning to slip behind him.

And that's when his reflection speaks to him.

'Irving, I need your help.'

It takes all my father's will-power not to drop the mirror.

'I understand how you must be feeling,' his reflection says. 'But I need you to remain calm.'

My father takes a very deep breath.

'Irving, do you have a full-length mirror in the house?'

'Yes,' he whispers, not believing he's actually chatting to his reflection. 'In the bedroom.'

'Can you bring it in here?'

My father nods.

'Please do so. We don't have much time.'

My father is compelled to act. It takes him a harrowing ten minutes to move the bulky mirror from his bedroom to the study. On more than one occasion he slams the back of the mirror against a wall, and each time he's convinced that he's woken the entire family. Personally, I was completely unaware of what happened that night. But my father's antics did wake someone in the house.

Once the mirror is in the study, he sees his full-length reflection has replaced the dressing gown he's wearing for an immaculate pin-striped suit, snowy white shirt, gleaming black shoes and cufflinks shaped like a triple helix.

'Excellent,' his reflection smiles. 'Now, all we need is a static charge. We can do it the old-fashioned way; I only need a small jolt.'

So my father heads back to his bedroom, slips on a pair of socks, returns to the study and rubs his feet in the plush carpet while

touching the mirror surface.

There is a crackle of electricity, the smell of something burning and suddenly, before my father's very eyes, the mirror bulges forward. He scrambles away as his reflection pushes itself from the mirror's surface. There's a pop and the reflection is free, the mirror surface remaining intact.

'Daddy?'

My father spins around and sees Caroline standing at the entrance of his study.

For a moment he witnesses fear in her eyes, quickly replaced by a burning curiosity.

'Caroline, go back to bed.'

But like her father, Caroline has never been good at taking orders. She marches up to her father's reflection and asks him who he is.

'I'm... I'm...' the reflection stumbles, on the verge of toppling over. My father is quickly by his doppelgänger's side, holding the man steady.

'Are you all right?'

The reflection slowly nods his head. 'Yes, I just need to get my bearings. So many voices...'

My father has no idea what voices the reflection is referring to. But as he's about to discover, very little of tonight will make much sense.

'Who are you?' My sister demands to know.

'Caroline, please show some manners.'

'No, Irving, please, it's a perfectly reasonable question.' The reflection appears at ease now, the smallest of smiles creasing his face. 'I'm Irving Braxiatel.'

'But that's not possible... I'm Irving Braxiatel.'

'Yes and no. You are Irving Braxiatel, but you are not *the* Irving Braxiatel.'

My father and Caroline look at each other. They're both smart cookies, brilliant at seeing patterns where others see chaos. But even they have no idea what the reflection is taking about.

So the reflection tells them a story. An impossible, crazy, insane story about an experiment gone wrong, about the fracturing of reality, about the end of the universe. The reflection finishes his tale by asking my father for help.

'Help... I'm struggling to believe a quarter of what you've just told me.'

The reflection shakes his head. 'Please, Irving, I know you far better than that. You and your daughter just saw me emerge from a mirror. And unless you think you've gone insane or are under some sort of mesmeric influence, I don't see how you can deny my story.'

'I don't doubt you exist,' my father says. 'But why should I trust

you?’

‘Because while you might be human, fundamentally we are both the same person and I’m sure you’re in the habit of trusting yourself.’

‘Are you saying you’re an alien?’ Caroline asks, her face bright with excitement.

Both my father and the reflection look fondly at her. ‘Yes, dear, I am. But in this possibility it seems I’m human.’

My father shakes his head, finding it hard to come to terms with everything he’s been told.

‘I appreciate your confusion,’ the reflection says. ‘This is why we must make contact before I loose cohesion with this reality.’ The reflection moves closer to my father. ‘You see, I’m the one true Irving Braxiatel, and for an eternity I’ve been travelling between each of the possibilities looking for a means to bring reality back to normal. And I believe I’ve found a solution.’ The reflection now stands directly opposite my father, only an inch apart. ‘All you need to do is look into my eyes and say “contact”.’

Caroline moves over to my father and takes hold of his hand. He feels her warmth and it dispels some of his fear.

My father stares into the eyes of his reflection and he spies something cold and alien lurking behind the human façade and he wants to break away, wants to believe that all this is an insane dream, but as the word contact leaves his lips he’s overwhelmed by the truth.

And all he wants to do is scream.

When he next opens his eyes, my father is lying in bed, Caroline sitting by his side. She asks him question after question but he doesn’t hear a word she’s saying. So much knowledge is floating around his mind, concepts and ideas that he never thought possible, let alone feasible. And amongst all these wild new notions, one shines like a beacon.

He turns to his daughter. ‘He wants me to build a bomb.’

‘How will blowing things up solve the problem?’

‘You don’t understand Caroline.’ My father’s voice barely rises above a murmur ‘The bomb doesn’t destroy people or buildings or countries, it destroys reality itself. He believes that by wiping from existence all the other possibilities, a stable pocket of reality will form where he can do whatever he needs to do to make things right. Oh, Goddess, Caroline... he’s asking me to wipe everything and everyone out.’

‘But, Daddy, you have to.’

What she says doesn’t register with him at first. All he can think about it is the grave responsibility that has been foisted upon him.

‘Dad... I think you should do it.’

He focuses on his daughter and sees that determined, stubborn

gleam in her eyes, the one that has had made her into the fine young scientist that she is. 'No... we all have so much to live for. You, Caroline, you have such a bright future ahead of you.'

'Dad, you always taught me as a scientist that my goal is to discover objective truth and to strip away illusion, preconceptions and lies. If our reality is a lie, then it is our duty as scientists to re-establish the truth. Don't you understand, Dad? Our lives are meaningless, because they were never meant to be.'

'No. I will not accept that!'

Caroline kisses her father on his cheek. 'We'll talk later. You need to relax.'

But my father couldn't relax. Every time he closed his eyes all he saw was the bomb ticking down to apocalypse.

* * *

I'm sitting in my kitchen, stunned by the fairy tale my father has just told me. Furious, I ask through gritted teeth, 'So obviously you never built the bomb?'

My father doesn't answer my question; instead he stares into the depths of his teacup and talks about Caroline. 'For months your sister and I argued. She tried to convince me that, because this reality was an accident, our lives had no meaning, but I wouldn't listen to her. So to prove her point she killed herself. All because I wouldn't build the bomb, all because I wouldn't end this reality'

I go ballistic.

'You egotistical, arrogant, self-obsessed bastard! Not only do you make up a story rather than tell me the truth, but then you have the freaking gall to link your damn fairy tale to the death of my sister. How dare you!'

My father raises his head. I'm stunned to see he's been crying; the tears mingling in with the sores. 'I thought you might understand,' he croaks. 'I thought our relationship had matured over the last —'

'Matured!' I snorted. 'How can any relationship mature when all you can do is lie? I still don't have a clue where you've been or why you left and you've never told me why you look so sick.'

'I'm somehow linked to the breakdown in reality. As it further fractures, my body becomes more and more unstable I —'

But I cut him off before he can lie any more. I don't want him in my house. 'GET OUT!' I scream.

He stares at me with sad eyes, and without another word he leaves.

Only when I hear the front door close do I break down and cry.

Now

'Please,' Doggles screamed to the crowd. 'He's going to kill me!'

Brax acted quickly. He moved over to Doggles and placed a firm

hand on the man's shoulder. 'Don't make this harder on yourself,' he whispered in the Cahlian's ear.

Doggles easily shrugged Brax aside. 'You're not the one who's about to be murdered in front of all these people.'

'No one's talking about killing you, Doggles,' Bernice said.

'But that's what he's planning, aren't you Braxiatel?'

All eyes turned on Brax. It wasn't an exaggeration to say the fate of the universe rested on how he handled this one moment. 'Doggles is linked to the machine. His body is full of Axis technology, and he and the machine are one. We need to sever that link.'

'And, pray tell, Braxiatel,' Doggles sneered. 'How do you propose to cut the link?'

Braxiatel turned to Bernice; of all the people standing in the garden he needed her to believe him. 'The link is located in his brain, so we need to remove his head from his shoulders.'

'Do you hear that, people!' Doggles shouted, ever the showman even when his life was as stake. 'Irving Braxiatel wants to chop my fucking head off. Are you just going to stand there and let him do that?'

Confusion spread through the crowd like a virus. Brax knew he was losing them. He didn't have time for this. What it had cost, just to grab this moment...

'Listen to me,' he commanded. 'This place we're standing in isn't real. Nothing we do here has any long-term meaning. It's simply a stable pocket connecting our reality to the next Possibility. I could murder you all and it wouldn't make a difference. Nothing we do here matters.'

'But if that's the case, then how can chopping off his head make any difference?' Bernice had joined Brax and Doggles on the stage. As he'd expected, she was playing the role of spokesperson for the crowd.

'Because he's lying,' Doggles spat. 'This isn't a stable pocket of reality — this is reality. If I die here, I die.'

'Not true,' Brax said. 'The moment his head is removed, everything snaps back to the way it's meant to be.'

'Rubbish!' Doggles yelled. 'Have I existed in all these other possibilities?'

'Yes.'

'And did I die in some of those possibilities?'

'Probably.'

'So why does the problem still exist? If this place is as meaningless as all the other possibilities, then cutting off my head should have no effect. Should it?'

Bernice turned to Brax. 'He does make sense.'

'Maybe so, but then Doggles hasn't just spent eternity attempting to solve that very problem.' Brax looked Benny in the eye. 'Please,

Bernice, you need to trust me.

Bernice's face was a picture of doubt. 'Brax, I don't know. I want to believe you... but... we can't just slice his head off. It doesn't feel right.'

'None of this is right,' Brax said. 'Look around you. Tell me what you see.'

'I see a lot of frightened, confused people.'

'And past that.'

Bernice narrowed her eyes. 'I see... I see...' She swallowed, her face went pale. 'Oh, shit... I can see me mourning the death of Peter, I can see me killing for the sake of killing, I can see me... as a man... and I'm fighting a war. I can see me knowing that Doggles has to die...'

'Those are all echoes, possibilities that were sacrificed to allow us this one opportunity.' Brax said. 'But as I told you before, if we wait any longer, that machine will continue to generate possibility until reality buckles under the strain and collapses entirely.'

Bernice sighed. 'I hate when things get all melodramatic.'

Doggles barged his way past Brax. 'Please tell me you're not actually thinking of chopping my head off. I mean... you wouldn't condone murder, would you?'

Bernice looked between Brax and Doggles, and the doubt became a tragic sort of certainty. 'I'm sorry. But if Brax is right then you won't really die.'

'He's mystifying you with technobabble!' Doggles screamed and before either of them could stop him, he leapt from the stage and disappeared into the Gardens.

Brax turned to Hass. The cold-suit looked ridiculous on the human's body. 'Could you please bring him back? We don't have much time.'

Hass nodded and strode off.

'What if you're wrong, Brax?' Bernice asked, her voice so small, so timid, so unlike her. 'What if we actually kill him?'

Brax didn't answer her question.

Then

It takes two years, but we finally break the back of the Axis.

For all their 'humans are best' rhetoric, we discover the Axis don't have the stomach for a prolonged war. I think they expected the Colony Worlds to fall to their hulking battleships, bristling with bleeding edge weaponry. But we fight like we have everything to lose, which we do, and our ferocity takes them by surprise.

My first few campaigns are disasters. Everyone I come close to is killed in the most horrible of ways and I learn quickly that relationships are a waste of time. So I detach myself from everyone around me and I focus on killing as many of their side as I can.

And I discover pretty quickly that when it comes to killing I'm pretty damn good. I slaughter like there's no tomorrow and, sometimes, I wish there weren't. My life would be so much happier if I were dead. But the Axis are incompetent. They keep missing me, and hitting my comrades.

I sign up for one campaign after the other, well beyond my initial tour of duty. All the while I think about Dad and his crazy-arse story about talking reflections and reality bombs and the end of the universe as we know it. On the surface I'm hoping the bastard is dead. Deep down, I don't like to admit what I'm feeling.

I'm made a colonel, given a battalion to lead deep into enemy territory. We're sweeping one of their secret bunkers, a happy place where they experimented on innocent aliens and 'tainted' humans. One of the main doors used to be a person. They rebuilt him as a security scanner, but all the time he's screeching in pain. We kill him and he's grateful. We kill anyone wearing a lab coat.

There's very little resistance, but we still have to watch ourselves; people fight harder when they know their cause is lost.

I walk down a dimly lit corridor with three other men. We find ourselves a well-equipped laboratory filled with scientists cowering behind barricades. One of them even has a weapon. We kill them all.

And just as we're leaving I hear my name.

The four of us bring our weapon to bear on a shrivelled old man, paper-thin face covered in red welts and green pustules. 'Ben,' the man whispers again.

I order my men to leave the laboratory and continue sweeping the bunker. They're reluctant at first, but one glare from me and they're scarpering for the exit. I aim my blaster rifle at the talking cadaver. 'Hi, Dad,' I say. 'So, decided to work for the Axis, did you? What a surprise.'

'Ben... I'm here for you.'

'Dad, I'm not in the mood for your crazy shit.' I power down my weapon. 'Why can't you just die?'

'I brought it with me,' Dad croaks, moving over to a lab table. He pushes aside a cooling body, revealing a simple brown box.

'How did you get here, Dad?'

'I told you.'

'No, you didn't.'

'Contact. We made contact.'

'Dad, any more of the cryptic crap and I'll kill you. I think I'll be doing both of us a favour.'

My father closes his eyes. When he next speaks his voice is firmer, more confident. 'The other Irving imparted his knowledge to me. Part of it was an ability to travel wherever I wanted.' My father pushes up

the sleeve of his stained shirt. Around his thin, frail wrist is a bracelet of some sort. 'A demat ring,' my father gasps. 'I homed in on your brainwaves and here I am.' My father closes his eyes again; his little speech has drained him.

'More lies,' I say.

Father shakes his head. 'All I want before I go is for you to believe me.' He pushes the box toward me. 'The reality bomb.'

I've had enough. My father is a broken man, trapped in a fantasy world. I still have no idea how he came here and, to be honest, I don't give a damn. Seeing him again hasn't kindled any feelings of love. Just this numb exhaustion. The feeling I've been running on the same spot for the last hour.

So without saying goodbye, I turn on my heel, power up my blaster rifle, activate the laboratory door and —

— I stare into infinity and it stares back at me.

I close the door and turn to my father. This time I march over to the frail old bastard, take him by the neck and shove his head hard against the lab table. Pustules burst open leaking tea-coloured ooze. 'What the frag have you done?'

'I wanted you to believe,' my father mumbles. 'So I detonated the bomb.'

'No...' I grit my teeth against the urge to break my father's neck. 'It was all a story.'

'You asked for the truth so I told you the truth.'

'But we've won the war, we beat the Axis...'

'Let go of me, Ben.' I'm surprised by the venom in my father's voice.

I release him and take a step back. 'If you detonated the bomb, how can we be still standing here?'

'This room is a stable pocket of reality,' my father says. 'It won't last very long.' I take a deep breath. So much to take in, and so little time to accept it all. 'You wiped everyone from existence.'

'As Caroline said, we were never meant to be. Our lives held no real meaning. This nothingness was always our destiny.'

I shake my head. 'No, Dad, that's crap and you bloody well know it. If you honestly thought our lives were meaningless than why did you spend six weeks trying to get to know me? And why did you come here? You've had two years to detonate that bomb of yours.'

My father doesn't answer my questions. I don't think I've ever beaten him in an argument.

'You came here because you wanted us to be a family again, just one last time. But that's all you ever wanted, isn't it?'

My father trembles. 'I never wanted children; I thought they'd get in the way. But your mother was so insistent. For many years I regretted the day Caroline and you were born. And then I saw how brilliant

Caroline was and I understood that I could be a father to her by developing her skills.'

'And what about me, Dad?'

'You were a great disappointment. But your mother loved you so I didn't think it mattered. But it did matter.' My father coughs hard and long, drops of blood smearing his gums and lips. 'I'm so sorry, Ben.'

I don't know what to say. For the last ten years I've dreamed of this moment. And in my dreams I've always seen myself walking up to my father and giving him a hug and a kiss and forgiving him all his sins. But we're both well past that stage and we know it.

'So what now?' I ask.

My father's smile is weak, but genuine. 'Why don't we watch the end together?' I help my father over to the laboratory door; it slides open and we stare straight into the abyss.

'What do you see?' my father asks me.

'Darkness.'

'And past that?'

I look beyond the blackness and see an infinity of possibilities. Realities where I'm never born, where I'm a woman, where I have a child of my own, where I live a life of adventure and love and laughter and sadness and tragedy.

'Are you ready?' I hear my father ask.

'No.'

'Neither am I.'

Parchment-dry fingers grasp hold of my hand. I want to tell my father how much I love him, but I would be lying. It's enough that I can share this one moment with him.

The end comes quickly.

Now

As Hass searched for Doggles, they paid their respects to the dearly departed. 'I loved him so much,' Bernice said. 'I know,' Brax said.

'I appreciate you coming here, but I thought we were running out of time.'

'We are.' Brax bent over and carefully raised the Martian sword from Wolsley's grave.

Bernice caught her breath. 'What in the hell do you think you're doing?'

'Bernice, the grave is empty.' He motioned to a small form emerging from behind a beautifully tended bush. It recognised its mistress immediately and bounded over to her, kitten-like, weaving between her legs. 'As I said, Bernice, history is changing. We can't let it continue.'

Bernice stared at Wolsley, completely lost for words. When she

finally looked at Brax there were tears in her eyes. 'What will happen to him once... once everything snaps back to normal?'

'I honestly don't know.' They heard a commotion from behind them, the sound of struggle. 'It seems Hass has found Doggles.'

As he passed the stunned audience, Doggles pleaded for mercy. 'How can you all watch as he kills me? What sort of people are you?'

But they'd now all witnessed their own possible realities, hidden by the thin veneer of the gardens. They'd almost used up the precious time bought by so many myriad realities blinking out of existence, but seeing the sort of people they might become, would become, had become, scared them senseless. They were nobodies now, and anything they did was not real.

Bernice was standing toward the back of the stage, hugging Wolsley tightly to her chest. She'd made it clear to Brax that while she agreed in principle with what he was doing, she didn't want to be involved in Doggles's death. No matter how unreal it proved to be. Brax glanced in her direction, saddened by the fear in her eyes. Not for the first time, he was aware of how much he depended on this particular human. Simple in so many ways, and yet behind all the bluster and alcoholic binges, a complexity that constantly fascinated him.

Doggles was now standing before Brax, struggling to break his captor's grip. Hass might be human, but for the moment he was still imbued with Martian strength.

'Tell me, Braxiatel,' Doggles hissed. 'Are you going to be able to live with your actions? How do you think Professor Summerfield's going to react when she finds out the truth?'

'She'll understand.'

'The blood will be on your hands as well as those of Benny!' Doggles screeched. 'You could have... you could have... Oh, please, Brax... please... please don't do it. Please let me live.'

Brax turned his attention to Hass. 'Push him to his knees and hold him steady.' The gardener did as he was told, shoving Doggles to the stage floor.

'We can find another way... I... I built the machine... we can find another way...' Hass tore the collar from Doggles's stained shirt, revealing a pale white neck. 'I can't die like... like this... no...'

The Martian sword was heavy in Brax's hands.

'I want to see my home... my family... I love them.'

Brax took a deep breath.

'My poor mummy...'

He raised the sword above his head —

'Mummy...'

— and with the practised ease of an executioner —

‘HE’S LYING TO YOU ALL!!!’

— brought the blade down on Doggle’s exposed neck.

The crunch of bone.

A scream cut short.

The sound of skull and flesh hitting the stage.

The splatter of blood.

So much blood.

Chapter Three

After Life

By Simon Guerrier

Two shadows fell across the grave. There was no stone yet as the ground had to settle first. Hass said it would take six to eight months. It seemed such a long time. Adrian had already agreed to prepare the stone, and Bernice had been shocked when he'd quoted her a week. Hass said he had spoken to him since, and arranged something. She felt stupid, annoyed they'd agreed it without her.

She stared down at the loose soil. Hass had encouraged her to help fill in the hole, a shovel at a time. Sweaty, tired, raw, it helped her not to think. She couldn't even manage tears. The grave looked peaceful now. This spot, just next to the greenhouse, always got the sun. It had been a favourite place. He had loved napping here, lying right in the way of the gardeners. Hass used to trip over him. She smiled at that, and tears came.

'Most favoured ally,' said Hass beside her. 'Oh, treasured sibling.' He began to chant, or sing, or sigh. It was difficult to tell from the way his voice echoed hollowly out of his pressure suit, drowned out by the mechanical breathing. Each intake of breath was an overlong, twenty-second hiss, the exhalation an immediate backblast, each separated from the other by an artificial glottal stop.

Bernice had made a last-minute effort to read up on his people's death rites, but it all remained oblique to her. Perhaps there was a paper in it. The gist was something to do with death uniting everybody in one, almighty family. Something like that, anyway. It seemed to mean a lot to Hass, though, and she didn't want to hurt his feelings. She was just glad there was someone else willing to share her grief.

Hass took a step back from the graveside, and raised his armoured hands out to each side. Orange and red glowed from behind his faceplate. He was really getting into this, she thought. And then, abruptly, he stopped. His arms fell to his sides and he was silent.

Bernice waited, assuming this was all part of the ritual. But nothing happened. And there was a noise behind her.

She turned. There were people, weeping. They came slowly, emerging from the trees, from around the back of the greenhouse, from everywhere, and assembled in the natural, grass amphitheatre that the grave overlooked. Hundreds of people, perhaps more, perhaps the whole Collection. They were pale, and some seemed battered and bruised. People clung to each other in twos and threes. For a moment

Bernice thought they wanted to join her for the ceremony, that maybe she wasn't the only one who would miss him.

But these people weren't *here* for Wolsey.

'Benny!' called Jason, as he hurried up to her, Peter clutched tightly in his arms. 'Benny, you're all right?'

'In a manner of speaking,' she said, cross he'd even managed to upstage a funeral. 'What is it? What's happened?'

'We don't know. But something...' He looked directly at her. 'Nryn is dead.'

'What?' She grabbed Peter from him, gathered the boy up. He was red-eyed from crying, but glad to have his mummy. She hated the thought he'd been anywhere near... well, whatever it was that had happened. They snuggled. 'Tell me everything,' she told Jason.

'There's nothing to tell,' he insisted, looking envious to be in on the hug. 'It's like something attacked her, she'd been bitten all over... And there are other things, too. Benny, Jess Carter's killed herself.'

'No!'

'Wt'hlrm was with her when I called about Nryn.'

'But that's awful! Jason, I only saw her -'

Jess looked a bit worse for wear, her eyes were bloodshot and her clothes looked slept in...

'I saw her,' said Bernice, shaking her head. 'It doesn't make any sense, but I only just saw her...'

'Wt'hlrm says there's been all sorts of weird stuff,' said Jason. 'And they all happened half an hour ago. Accidents, weird things, stuff like that. You know more than the usual.'

'We should continue the ritual later,' said Hass, stalking over. He tickled Peter's cheek with one of his fat, metal fingers. 'There are too many people here.'

'Fine,' Bernice replied, cross for Wolsey's sake. What the hell had happened to them all?

Peter in her arms, Jason right behind her, cradling his mangled hand. She snaps her head around, trying to shake the blood from her eyes. Turns to check he's there, and he's gone. She screams his name but the word is torn from her mouth, ripped away by the wind.

'What?' said Jason, snapping her back into the present. 'You've got that look, Benny. Like when you know something.'

'No,' she said, reeling. 'But it's like I remember... like it's just out of reach.'

'Yeah,' said Jason. 'I think we're all getting that. Look at them.'

As bidden, she watched the people gathering around her, all of

them showing the same look she'd seen in the mirror that morning. That terrible sense of loss, of not knowing how to carry on... But she had been angry, as well. Angry that no one shared how she was feeling, that no one understood. And now everyone felt the same. She could see it, as they came together to share in this mourning.

Yet someone was missing. She could sense it. Alert now, Bernice picked quickly over their faces, looking for something, for someone, but not quite sure who. She looked quickly back, her eye catching a glint of red skin.

No, she must have mistaken a scarf, coiled languorously round the necks of Parasiel and whoever it was putting up with him these days. He looked older, more careworn, like he'd aged several years. Yes, the girl had noticed it too, was even tracing the lines around his eyes with one finger.

Peter struggled in her arms, and Bernice let him down to the ground. He toddled over to the grave, Jason close behind him, stopping him just before he threw himself at the mound of loose soil. On one knee, Jason whispered into Peter's ear, and Peter listened carefully. He glanced quickly over at Bernice, and she was stabbed by the pitying look he gave her. Could a child Peter's age understand loss, understand what had happened and what this ritual hoped to do? She was hardly coping herself, numbed by grief. But he seemed quite content just to be a part of it, to scoop a tiny handful of earth and add it to the heap. Simple, instinctive — of course he understood that bit. He was a builder. Like his father, he'd see death and destruction as a chance to build anew.

She located the gravestone and ran her palms over the cool granite...

'Goodbye, Adrian.'

Bernice shuddered at the thought, not able to place the morsel of memory. It was more like a glimpse of a dream. But she remembered gravestones, she remembered gravestones here, in this spot, stretched out in front of her. Was that why everyone had come here? However consciously, whatever they remembered, they'd been drawn to this place to grieve for whatever had happened.

Yes, they'd been hit by something. She could feel it. What had possibly managed to get past Adrian's new defences?

And what new defences would those be, she thought.

'Peter,' said Bernice.

He beamed up at her. 'Mummy?'

'Can you take care of Jason? Mummy needs a word with Uncle Brax.'

The Masaccio was face down on the floor. Bernice hurried over, edged

her fingers quickly round the frame checking for damage, and lifted it up. There seemed to be no obvious harm done — the thickness of the frame had saved the painting itself. Still, she'd get the porters to look it over, whenever she next had a chance. Carefully, she heaved the canvas up and reunited it with the sturdy hook on the wall. Unsettling, to see something in the Mansionhouse disturbed like that. Again, how —

'But this is *intolerable!*' Braxiatel's voice, carrying down the hall, was followed by a crash. The walls trembled and the Masaccio dropped neatly back into Bernice's outstretched arms. She placed the frame carefully on the armchair beside her and went to investigate.

Braxiatel's usually immaculate office was a mess. Papers were strewn everywhere, and the desk was on its side. The ornate mirror over the mantelpiece had cracked, thick, jagged lines running through it. The man himself had his back to her, attention fixed on a small 3D screen from which a Martian grinned smugly. This would have to be Sset, thought Bernice. For the last few weeks, Brax had been caught up in some horrific argument with the Martian ambassador. They had spent hours over the v-screens, trading barbed pleasantries, comparing archaic law. At the root of the discussions were some ancient Martian artefacts the Collection shouldn't really have. It was all proving messy and complex.

Brax was leafing frantically through an overweight textbook. 'The law is inviolable in a case like this,' he said angrily. 'It won't take me a moment to find the reference...'

He reached the end of the book and tossed it onto the heap of discarded volumes beside him. Slain! Bernice was horrified to see the spine of the book tear loose. Brax hadn't noticed, however, already haring through another tome.

'Negotiations going well?' she asked, as nonchalantly as she could manage.

Brax whirled round, and for a second she thought he might lob the book at her. Instead, seeing who she was, he took a breath and turned back to the screen.

'One moment while I consult with my team,' he said, and switched Sset neatly off. Braxiatel eyed Bernice carefully. 'We've hit something of a snag,' he said. Like everyone else on the Collection, he looked haunted and weary.

'Want to tell me about it?' Bernice asked cheerily, knowing that of course he wouldn't.

He considered. 'Why not?' he said, as if it couldn't make matters any worse. 'You put the kettle on and I'll straighten things up a bit.'

While the water boiled, they were busy righting the furniture. Bernice helped gather up the assorted papers from the floor, and Brax

set the teapot to brew. Finally, they sat down in the plump, enveloping armchairs that Benny had always coveted. She sipped her tea, conscious of her little finger sticking out as she held onto the delicate cup. Bernice had never been one for elegance.

‘He’s got footage from inside the Mansionhouse,’ said Brax, without any preamble. ‘He knows exactly what we’re holding here. Even the items that I might, ahem, not have declared.’

‘Ah,’ said Bernice, sagely. ‘Tricky one. Non-disclosure isn’t going to look good to an independent adjudicator.’

‘No, I don’t think it will.’

‘But how did he get into the Mansionhouse?’ asked Bernice, eyeing the macaroons he’d unearthed. ‘Adrian’s meant to have shored up security, hasn’t he?’

‘Oh,’ said Brax. ‘I expect the clades must have made some recordings.’

‘The clades?’

Braxiatel leant forward. ‘You mean you don’t remember, Bernice?’ he said.

‘Of course I remember. Er... remember what, exactly?’

‘The explosion, Benny. The machine that... I thought you of all people would recall something. You’re used to this sort of incident.’

‘Oh, there’s been an incident, has there? That’s why we’re all wandering about shell-shocked?’

‘You mean you don’t remember the invasion?’

‘Brax,’ said Bernice, carefully. ‘You should get out of this room every so often, take the air, speak to people. Otherwise you go all peculiar. There’s not been an invasion. Not for ages, anyway.’

‘Hmm,’ said Braxiatel. He munched on a macaroon, thoughtfully. ‘Oh, never mind,’ he said. ‘It’s probably better that no one else remembers. Less traumatic, all round.’

‘I don’t like this, Brax. What’s got into you?’

‘Into me, Bernice?’

‘You’re in good spirits. Having just had your bottom whupped by this Sset bloke. Which means you haven’t had it whupped at all, doesn’t it? What are you planning, you old rascal?’

‘Oh, I’m not beaten yet,’ smiled Braxiatel. ‘I may have given that appearance just now, of course.’

Bernice sat back in her seat, indulgently. ‘Go on, then. Amaze me. What are you going to do?’

‘The clades are a dishonourable way of transacting business. So Sset can’t actually use this evidence of his. At least, not once I’ve had Hass have a word.’

‘Hass? What, our Hass?’

‘Yes, Bernice. He said he’d intercede with Sset’s mother, if need be.’

Bernice snorted. 'I can just see him being brilliant with people's mothers. No really, Brax, what are you actually planning?'

Braxiatel stared at her over his teacup. 'Hass is Sset's brother,' he said.

Bernice almost dropped her tea, but she stifled the impulse to laugh. 'I really don't think that's possible,' she said. 'Martians and Yesodi don't have compatible parts. I mean...'

She rarely saw Brax surprised, so it wasn't always easy to recognise. But he was sat back in his seat, eyes wide, a peculiar, open-mouthed smile on his face. Perhaps she had got this all wrong.

'Hass is from Yesod, isn't he?' she said. 'In the Kether-Tiphereth system...' Braxiatel shook his head slowly. 'That's not likely,' he said. 'There aren't any humanoids there.'

'No,' said Bernice, wondering where this was leading. 'That's why he has to wear that pressure suit of his. He's really a radioactive glob of orange, jellyfish goo. In his own words, I should add. Come on, Brax, what would a Martian warrior be doing gardening?'

Hass looked up from his digging. 'Have you ever made plans for what you will achieve?'

She stopped short. 'But I remember a Martian doing gardening...' she said, in a small voice.

'Yes,' said Braxiatel, regarding her. 'I thought you would have to retain something.'

'It's... there are overlaps, aren't there?'

'I'd be surprised if anyone else was as acutely aware of it as we are,' said Braxiatel. 'But yes. I thought I would reset everything, put it back as it was. But there's been some kind of carry-over, some kind of effect.'

'Our memories are all of a muddle. Is that it?'

'Yes,' said Brax. 'Bits from different realities have collided together, and some of them seem to have stuck.'

'Oh, good. It's all going to be horribly confusing for weeks, isn't it? Bloody typical. Maybe I could get away. You've seen what they're saying about Trib City, yeah? The Head of Jedawa —'

'History,' observed Braxiatel, 'as a discipline, compares accounts of events. Often, those accounts are contradictory.'

She stared at him. 'You're quoting something,' she said.

'We are trained to evaluate them, to compare them, assess them,' Braxiatel continued, the expression on his face inscrutable. 'And somewhere, in between their varied perspectives, we find a truth.'

'Don't lecture me on history,' she snapped. She hated him for being so glib, so clinical. People had died — Nryn, Jess, who knew who else — and he was the only one to know why. Couldn't he see what this

was doing to her? She felt hollowed out, bereft and bewildered. He had never considered her feelings, seemed incapable of empathy. Now he made light of her grief, used it as an excuse to philosophise.

He sighed. 'I should get back to Sset,' he said. 'Agree terms, if that's how it has to be.'

'You'll surrender?' She couldn't believe that for one moment.

'Oh, I'd hardly call it that. But there are ways we can both save face.'

'Hmm. Okay then. I guess I should get off to the spaceport.'

'You should?'

'Yes,' she said. 'I have to meet...'

Braxiatel raised an eyebrow.

'Oh,' she said.

'His work cannot be sanctioned,' said Braxiatel sternly. 'General research is fine, but temporo-spatial visualisations might interfere with our security arrangements.'

'Cause feedback,' agreed Bernice.

'Yes.'

'Which would be catastrophic in a closed system. You've taken the Collection out of time and space, haven't you? I remember...'

He sipped the last of his tea. 'Do you really want to know?'

'Not really. But no to Doggles's experiments?'

'No to Doggles's experiments.'

She nodded. 'I'll tell him,' she said.

* * *

She walked barefoot to the spaceport, carrying her shoes in one hand. Cutting through the garden, the grass was soft underfoot. Again, it brought fleeting memories of .. of ..

No, it was gone again.

Bernice still had some time, so she stepped quietly through the ferns and into the secret, magical place that Jason and Hass had made for her. Huge pale bodies of ghost gum trees loomed overhead. Flowers hung from the arms of the trees, tangling through the branches in patterns like jazz. Vines and creepers tied it all together, swaying in the afternoon breeze. The grove was her special place, unknown to anyone else...

Two people were sat in the middle of the grove, their backs to her. Bernice was so shocked, she almost yelled at them to get out. But a glance at the way they were sitting told her they were best left alone.

'I remember you dying,' said the woman, reaching her hand out to touch the face of the tall man-dog. The man pulled back, uncomfortable. Someone else knew things had been different.

'We were never...' he said, his voice gruff. It was Adrian. 'I don't disbelieve you,' he said. 'It's just I don't remember any of that

happening.'

'Adrian,' said the woman, and Bernice knew it had to be Bev. Tender and sad and longing, a Bev that Benny had never met.

She heard a whistle and looked around to see Bev Tarrant coining her way, her hair done up in girlish bunches.

They turned, flinching at the sound Bernice must have made. 'Who's there?' asked Bev, more like herself again.

'Sorry,' said Bernice, coming forward. 'I didn't mean —'

'Summerfield!' That familiar scorn.

'Now look, Bev —'

Bev puffed out her cheeks and looked at her, wide-eyed. 'Well, I can see why you wouldn't ask Adrian or Jason.'

Bernice tried to —

The crack of a rifle from the window. Silence.

She ran forward, grabbed Bev before the woman could resist, and hugged her close. After a moment, Bev stopped resisting and hugged back. Beside them, Bernice could hear Adrian being awkward, not knowing what to do.

'I'm sorry,' said Bernice, into Bev's ear. 'I did something terrible...'

'You died too,' said Bev. 'And everything fell apart...'

'You remember something? You remember what happened?'

'No,' said Bev, tears streaming down her face. 'Yes. I mean... Scraps of things.' She almost laughed. 'Adrian doesn't know what's hit him, poor bloke.'

'Best way,' said Bernice. 'I think the time travellers have all been hit hardest by this. We're more perceptive.'

'Bully for the time travellers,' said Adrian.

'S'not bloody fair,' said Bev, wiping her nose on her sleeve. 'It's always us.'

'Well, we're special. Listen Bev, I'm sorry. It wasn't me. Well, it was. But anyway. I'm sorry.'

Bev regarded her. 'Yeah, me too,' she said at last. 'Hell, Summerfield. How 'bout a truce?'

They hugged again, the past forgotten for that instant. Bernice withdrew first, aware she'd be running late for the spaceport. Bev looked miserable, her mascara had run, highlighting the scars on the side of her face. She grinned.

'You're such a mess, Summerfield.'

'Charming. So, are you and Adrian...?'

Bev bit her lip. Adrian put one arm around her. Not too tightly, not too showily, just for support, nothing else. Yet.

‘We’ll see,’ he said.

The Collection’s spaceport bustled and shoved. Overcome by fragments of terrible memory, Bernice didn’t want to be around anyone, for fear of what they might trigger. She searched for a nook she could hide in, and found a corner, across from the arrivals hall. People still pushed past her, but less so than out in the open. They all seemed so eager to escape. She scanned the boards detailing arrivals, reading the words though not taking them in. The flight she was after had landed. Her quarry would be meeting his bags.

Except he wouldn’t have bags with him, she remembered.

He knew how to argue. The pilot backed away. Doggles stuck his hands into his baggy trouser pockets.

‘Benny!’

Bernice turned, horrified and delighted to see Jason and Peter hurrying over.

‘What are you two doing here?’ she said, letting Peter leap up into her arms. He was getting heavy these days, and she had to bend her knees a bit to support his weight. ‘How did you know where I’d be?’

Jason gazed at her. ‘I remember,’ he said solemnly. ‘I remember that you left me.

Bernice was stung. ‘Jason, I never —’

He’d had the scars treated and grafted by specialists, and said that they had gradually improved over the years. Bernice had never asked to see.

* * *

‘Benny,’ said Jason. ‘I love you. I’d do anything for you, even let you go. And if you get a better offer, if there’s someone who can make you happier than I can, then fine.’ He smiled that lopsided, dopey smile of his. ‘I just want you to be on your guard.’

She kissed him, determined it would always be them, together, against the universe. With Peter clambering between them.

Arm in arm, Bernice and Jason watched the exit gates. People milled around them. So many people were leaving the Collection, bent low, hurt, uncomprehending. She wondered what had happened elsewhere, what the rest of space was like. But the Collection was a closed system. To keep it safe, Brax had hidden the planetoid away in his own ship, outside of time and space. So maybe it was them who’d been affected. She hated to think what else could have happened... They would know about it soon enough.

People emerged from the gate. A Galyari in a long robe tried not to

appear lost. A Zzetra-elemental, leaving an ochre slime behind him. A young Cahlian scratched at his armpit, wide-eyed in astonishment as he stared back at Bernice.

She looked quickly away. The man came towards her. Humanoid, with fiery-coloured skin, Cahlians were often immaculate. This one, though, could have slept in his clothes. There were stains down the front of his shirt where he'd spilled several meals. He needed a shave, and to brush his hair, and to wash on a more regular basis. She looked anywhere but in his direction, held on to Jason's hand tight. Still he kept coming. She thought of his beautiful skin and the scars patchworking it, and all the terrible things done to him. And all she could feel was pity for him.

'I think we've met,' said Doggles, a mask of bravado to cover his bafflement.

'Hello Doggles,' said Bernice, all matter-of-fact. Whatever it was she had ever seen in him, it was long forgotten now. Put it down to her evil, mirror-universe double. The one with the eyepatch, probably — or was that someone else?

'I'm Professor Summerfield,' she said, keeping things formal. 'This is my partner, Jason Kane.'

Doggles put his hand out to her.

'Hello, Benny,' he said. And he smiled. His smile was disarming, radiant. Without wanting to, Bernice smiled back.

Oh, hell, she thought.

Benny returns in *Professor Bernice Summerfield and the Lost Museum*,
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Pip pip!

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